



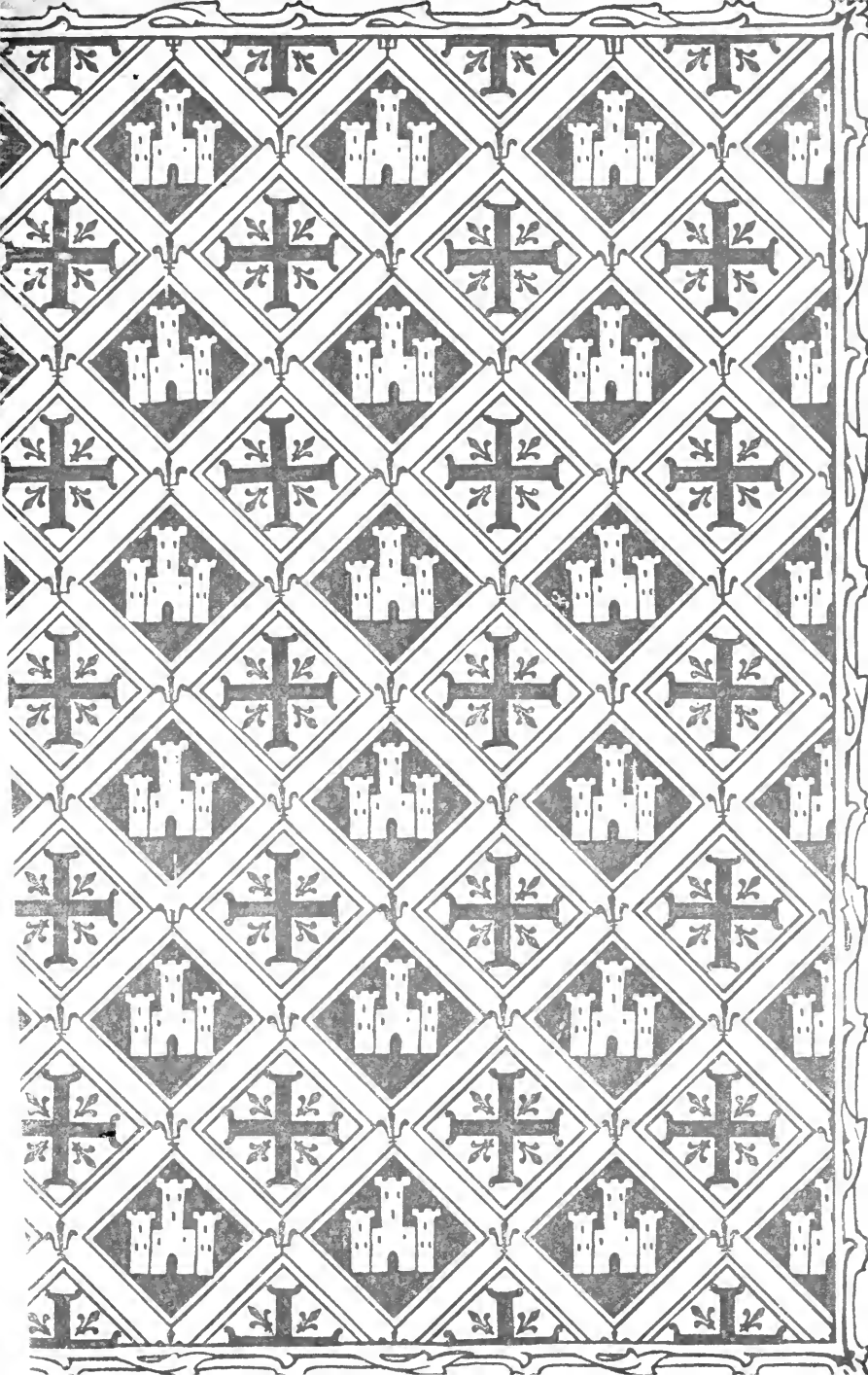
THE CASTLE OF TWILIGHT

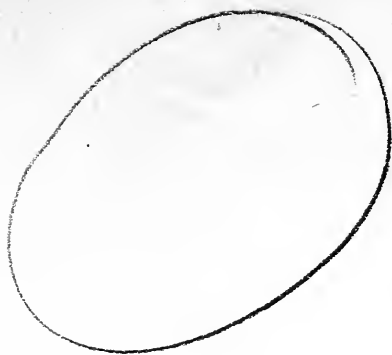
MARGARET HORTON POTTER



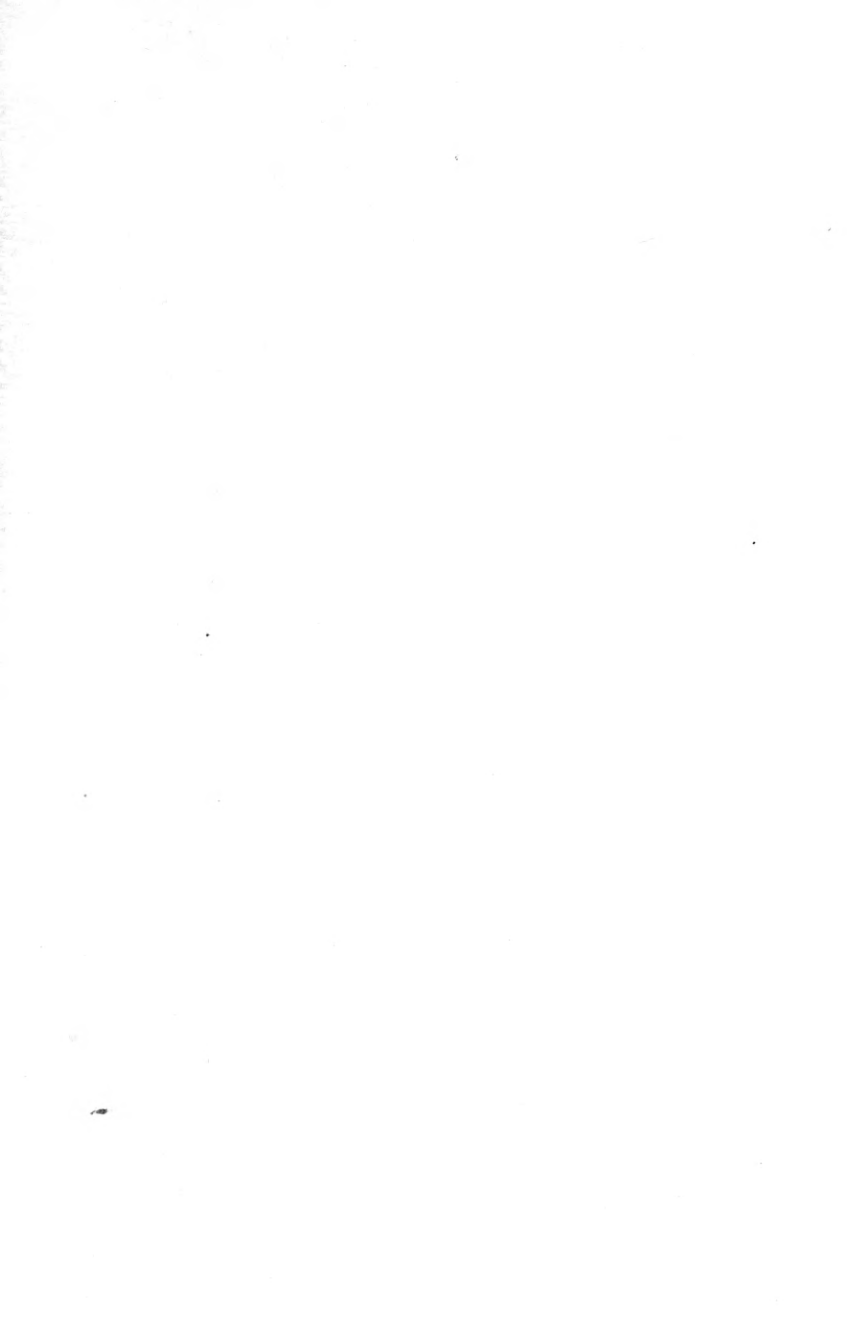
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The Castle of Twilight







THE CASTLE OF TWILIGHT

By MARGARET
HORTON POTTER

*With six Illustrations
by Ch. Weber*



CHICAGO
A.C. McCLURG & CO
1903

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PS

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TO

G. M. McB.

WHOSE MUSIC SUGGESTED THE STORY

*This little volume is faithfully
inscribed*

939861



Nocturne — Grieg: Opus 54, No. 4.



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*The decorations for title-page, end-papers, and chapter
initials are by Miss Mabel Harlow*

FOREWORD

*W*ISTFULLY I deliver up to you my simple story, knowing that the first suggestion of "historical novel" will bring before you an image of dreary woodenness and unceasing carnage. Yet if you will have the graciousness but to unlock my castle door you will find within only two or three quiet folk who will distress you with no battles nor strange oaths. Even in the days of rival Princes and never-ending wars there dwelt still a few who took no part in the moil of life, but lived with gentle pleasures and unvoiced sorrows, somewhat as you and I; wherefore, I pray you, cross the moat. The drawbridge is down for you, and will not be raised, if, after introduction to the Chatelaine, you desire speedily to retreat.

M. H. P.

The CASTLE *of* TWILIGHT



CHAPTER ONE

THE DESOLATION OF AGE



IT was mid-April: a sunny afternoon. A flood of golden light, borne on gusts of sweet, chilly air, poured through the open windows of the Castle into a high-vaulted, massively furnished bedroom, hung with tapestries, and strewn with dry rushes. A heavy silence that was less a thing of the moment than a part of the general atmosphere hovered about the room; and it was not lessened by the unceasing murmur of ocean waves breaking upon the face of the cliff on which the Castle stood. This sound held in it a note of unutterable melancholy. Indeed, despite the sunlight, the sparkle of the waves, and the fragrance of the fresh spring air, this whole building, the culminating point of a long slope of landscape,

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seemed wrapped in an atmosphere of loneliness, of sadness, of lifelessness, that found full expression in the attitude of the black-robed woman who knelt alone in the high-vaulted bedroom.

Eleanore was kneeling at her priedieu. Madame Eleanore knelt at her priedieu, and did not pray. Nay, the great grief, the unvoiced bitterness in her heart, killed prayer. For, henceforth, there was one near and unbearably dear to her who must be praying for evermore. And it was this thought and the vista of her future lonely years that denied her, even as she knelt, the consolation of religion.

To the still solitude of her bedchamber, and always to the foot of her crucifix, the châtelaine of Le Crépuscule was accustomed to bring her griefs; and there had been many griefs and some very bitter ones in the thirty-four years that she had reigned as mistress over the Castle. But this last was one that, trained though she was in the ways of sorrow, defied all comfort, denied the right of consolation, and forbade even the relief of an appeal to the All-merciful. Laure, her daughter, the star of her solitude, the youth and the joy

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of her life, the object of all the blind devotion of which her mother-soul was capable, had this morning entered upon her novitiate at the convent of the Virgins of the Magdalen. Although Madame Eleanore's family was celebrated for its piety, though many a generation of Lavals and Crépuscules had rendered a daughter to the eternal worship of God, there were still no records left in either family of a great mother-grief when the daughter left her home. But madame, Laval as she was, Crépuscule as she had learned to be, could not find it in her heart to praise God for the loss of her child.

Once again, after many years, years that she could look back upon now as filled with broad content, she was alone. Not since, many, many years ago, she had come to the Castle as a girl-bride, wife of a military lord, had such utter desolation held her in its bonds,—such desolation as, after the coming of her two children, she had thought never to feel again. In the days after the Seigneur's first early departure for Rennes, without her, she had felt as now. It came back very vividly to her memory, how he had ridden away for the

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capital, the city of war, of arms, of glittering shield and piercing lance, of tourney and laughter and song ; how she had longed in silence to ride thither at his side ; how she had wept when he was really gone ; how she had watched bitterly, day after day, for his return up the steep road that came out of the forest on the edge of the sand-downs below. Clearly indeed did her youth return to Eleanore as she knelt here, in the barred sunlight, alone with her unheeding crucifix. And intertwined with this memory was the new sense of blinding sorrow, the loss of Laure.

The reality, as it came to her, seemed even now vague and impossible. Laure, her girl, her strong, wild, adventurous, high-hearted, fearless girl, to become a nun ! Laure, of whom, in her own way, Eleanore had been accustomed to think as she thought of the great white gulls that veered, through sunlight and storm, on straight-stretched pinions, along the rocky coast, as a creature of light, of air, above all of perfect, indestructible freedom ! This, her Laure, to become a nun ! Spite of what the Bishop of St. Nazaire had so earnestly told her, how, in all strong natures, there are

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strong antitheses and quiet, governing depths that no outer turbulence can disclose, Eleanore rebelled at the disposal that had been made of this nature. She knew herself too well to believe that her daughter could renounce all the joys of youth and of life without a single after-pang.

After this early mother-thought for the child's state, Eleanore's self-grief returned again with redoubled force; and her brain conjured up a vision of the future,—that great, shadowy future, that wrapped her heart around in a cold and deadening despair.

The April wind blew higher through the room, catching the tapestry curtains of the immense bed and waving them about like blue banners. The bars of sunlight mellowed and broadened over the shrunken rushes and the smooth stones of the floor. The surf boomed louder as the tide advanced. And Eleanore, still upon her knees, rocked her body in her helpless rebellion, and found it in her heart to question the righteous wisdom of her God. She did not, however, come quite to this; for which, afterwards, she found it expedient to give thanks to the same deity. Her solitude

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was unexpectedly broken. There came a knock upon the door, which immediately afterwards opened, and Gerault, her son, entered the room.

This fourth Seigneur of Le Crépuscule, a dark-browed, lean, and rather handsome fellow, clad in half armor and carrying on his wrist a falcon, jessed and belled, was the first of Eleanore's two children. She revered him as his father's successor; she held affection for him because she had borne him; and she respected him and his wishes because he was a man that commanded respect. But perhaps it was this very respect, which had in it something of distance, that killed in her the overwhelming love which she had always felt for his sister Laure, her youngest and beloved.

Gerault, seeing his mother's attitude, stopped short in the doorway. "Madame, I crave pardon! I had not known you were at prayer," he said.

Eleanore rose from her knees a little hastily. "Nay, Gerault, I was not at prayer. 'Tis an old custom of mine to meditate in that place. Enter thou and sit with me for a little."

Gerault bowed silently and accepted her in-

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vation by seating himself near one of the windows on a wooden settle. His silence seemed to demand speech from his mother. But Eleanore, once on her feet, had begun slowly to pace the floor of her room, at the same time losing herself again in her own thoughts.

Without speaking and without any discomfort at the continued silence, Gerault watched his mother — contemplated her, rather — as she walked. Often he had felt a pride — a pride that suggested patronage — in that walk of madame's. Never, in any woman, had he seen such a carriage, such conscious poise, such dignity, such command. In his heart her son, somewhat given to irreverent observation and analysis of those about him, had named her the "Quiet-Browed," and the very fact that he could have seen somewhat below the surface and yet named her thus, was evidence enough of her powers of self-control. It was he who finally broke the silence between them.

"Well, madame, the change in our house hath taken place. Laure's new life is safely begun; and she hath given what she could to

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the honor of our race. Now that it is done, I return to Rennes, to the side of my Lord Duke."

Eleanore made no pause in her walk, nor did she betray by the slightest gesture her feeling at the announcement. Too many times before had she experienced this same sensation. After a few seconds she asked quietly: "When do you go?"

In spite of her self-control, her voice had been a strain off the key, and now Gerault looked at her keenly, asking: "There is a reason why I should not ride to Rennes? I have not thy permission to go?"

Eleanore paused in her walk to turn and look at him. There was just a suggestion of scorn in her attitude. "Reason! Permission! Was ever a reason why a *Crépuscule* might not fare forth to Rennes, or one that asked permission of a woman ere he went?"

Again Gerault looked at her, this time in that dignified disapproval that man uses to cover an unlooked-for mortification. And the Seigneur was decidedly lofty as he said: "I have given thee pain, madame, though of how, or wherefore, I am wofully ignorant."

“Pain, Gerault? Pain?” Eleanore repressed herself again and immediately resumed her walk. In a few seconds the calm, quiet dignity returned, her mask was replaced, every vestige of her feeling hidden, and she had become once more the châtelaine of unvoiced loneliness. Then she went on speaking: “Pain, Gerault? Surely not. Know I not enough of Rennes that I should not be well content to have thee in that lordly place, with thy rightful companions, men of thy blood? Shall I not send thee gayly forth again to that trysting-place of knightly arms?”

“And yet, madame, I did but now surprise in thy face a look of sorrow, of some unhappiness, that is new to it.”

“Well, even so?”

“Ah, yes! It is Laure’s departure. Yet that must not be too much mourned. Laure’s wild ways had come to be a source of uneasiness to both of us at times. ’Tis true that there is lost an alliance that might have brought much honor to Le Crépuscule. By the favor of my Lord Duke, Laure might have wed with Grantmesnil, Senlis, Angers itself, perhaps; and there was ever Laval. — Yet —”

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He paused musingly, not seeing the look that had come back into the face of madame. Only when she stopped again and turned to him did he utter a soft exclamation, half surprise and half helpless apology. But Eleanore, smiling at him sadly, began, in that voice that had long been tuned to the stillness of the Castle: "If I could but make thee understand, Gerault! If I could make thee look upon my hours of loneliness here — and see — Gerault, it is not a matter of alliance, or of honor, or of dishonor, with Laure. It is that she was my child, my daughter, my companion — how adored! — here, in this — this great Castle of Twilight. Neither thou nor any man can know what our lives are. — But think, Gerault — think of me and of the Castle after thou art gone. What is there for me here? The tasks that I invent to fill the hours are useless to deaden thought. They are not changed from the occupations of thirty years ago. Nor, methinks, have women known aught else than spinning, weaving, sewing, spinning again, since the days of the earliest kings, — the Kings of Jerusalem. — And day after day through the long years I dwell here in this barren spot —

dependent on others for what happiness I am to get in my life. And now—now the Church, in which always my hope of another, better life hath lain, taketh my child from me. Let then the Church give me something in place of her! Let the Church pay back something of its debt. And thou also, my son,—give me some help to live through the unending days of thy absence in Rennes.”

“I, madame!—the Church!—What art thou saying?”

“Hast thou not heard me?”

“I have heard. But what shall I do, my mother?”

“Listen, Gerault. The Church hath taken a daughter from me. Thou, by the aid of the Church, canst give me another. Gerault, thou must marry. Marry, my son. Bring thy wife home to me!”

Gerault sprang to his feet with an expression on his face that his mother had never before called there. For a moment he looked at her, his eyes saying what his lips would not. Then, gradually, the fire in his face died down, and he reseated himself slowly on the settle, while the bird on his wrist, a wild *bagard*, fluttered its

wings, and dug its talons painfully into the knight's flesh.

"Marry!" said Gerault, at length, in a voice that sounded strange to his own ears. "Marry! Hast thou forgotten?"

"Nay, I have not forgotten; nor has anyone in the Castle. But thou, Gerault, must forget. It is now five years since, and thou art more than come to man's estate. Even then thou wast not young. — Nay, Gerault, I do not forget that cruel thing. Yet we must all go. — And ere I die I must see thee wed. 'T is not only for myself, child. It is for the house, and the line of Crépuscule. Shall it be lost in four generations?"

Frowning, Gerault rose. "Well, madame, not as yet have I seen in Brittany the maid that I would wed, barring always —" He shook himself to dissipate the memory that was on him. "To-morrow I and Courtoise ride forth to Rennes. Let me now leave thee once more to thy meditations."

Gerault went to the door, opened it, turned to look once at his mother, whose face he could not see, and then, with an audible sigh, went quietly away. Each was ignorant of the other's

feelings. As Eleanore moved over toward the open windows that looked off upon the sea, her eyes, tear-blinded, saw nothing of the broad plain of blue and sparkling gold that stretched infinitely away before her. Nor did she dream of the spirit of reawakened bitterness and desolation that her words had conjured up in Gerault's heart. But the Seigneur's calm and unruffled expression concealed a very storm of reawakened misery as he descended the great stone staircase of the Castle, passed through the empty lower hall, and so out into the courtyard.

This courtyard was always the liveliest spot about the chateau. *Le Crépuscule* itself was very large, and its adjacent buildings were on a corresponding scale. Like all the feudal fortress-castles of its time, it was almost a little city in itself. It dated from the year 1203, and had been built by the first lord of the name, Bernard, a left-handed scion of Coucy, who had been called *Crépuscule* from his colors, two contrasting shades of gray. Since his time, each of its lords had added to its strength or its convenience, till now, in the year 1380, it was the strongest chateau on the South Breton

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coast. One side was built on the very edge of an immense cliff against which the Atlantic surf had beaten unceasingly through the ages. The other three sides were well protected, first by a heavy wall that surrounded the whole courtyard with its various buildings, beyond which came a broad strip of garden land and pasturage, bounded on the far side by the second, or lower wall, and a dry moat. The keep was of a size proportionate to the Castle ; and the number of men-at-arms that were kept in it taxed the coffers of the rather meagre estate to the utmost for food and pay.

When Gerault entered the courtyard a girl stood drawing water from the round, stone well. Two or three henchmen lolled in the doorway of the keep, chaffing a peasant who had come up the hill from one of the manor farms carrying eggs in a big basket. Just outside the stables, which occupied the whole east side of the courtyard, a boy stood rubbing down a sleek, white palfrey. All of these people respectfully saluted their lord, who returned them rather a curt recognition as he passed round the west tower on his way to a little narrow building just in front of the north

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gate, in which his falcons were housed through the winter. Gerault had a great passion for hawking, and his birds were always objects of solicitude with him. He and Courtoise, his squire, were accustomed to spend much time together in this little building, and in the open-air falconry on the terrace outside the north gate, where young birds or newly captured ones were trained.

Just now Gerault stood in the doorway of the falcon-house, looking around him for Courtoise, whom he had thought to find within. He was speaking to the bird on his wrist, his mind still occupied with the recent talk with his mother, when, through the gate, came a burst of laughter and song, and he raised his eyes to see a giddy company swaying toward him in the measure of a "carole"¹ led by Courtoise and Laure's foster-sister, Alixe la Rieuse. Moving a little out of their way he stood and watched the group go by,—the demoiselles and the squires of the Castle household, retained by his mother as company for herself, also to be trained in etiquette

¹ A "carole" was originally a dance to which the dancers sang their own accompaniment.

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according to their several stations. And a pretty enough company of youth and gayety they were: Berthe, Yseult, Isabelle, Viviane, daughters all of noble houses; with Roland of St. Bertaux, Louis of Florence, Robert Meloc, and Guy d'Armenonville, called "le Trouvé." But, of them all, Alixe, surnamed the Laughing One, was the brightest of eye, the warmest of color, and the lightest of foot.

As they went by, Gerault signalled to his squire, Courtoise, and the young fellow would have disengaged himself immediately from his companions, but that Alixe suddenly broke her step, dropped the hand of Robert Meloc, who was behind her, and leaving the company, ran to Gerault's side, dragging Courtoise with her. The dance ceased while the young people stood still, staring at their erstwhile leaders. Alixe, however, impatiently motioned them on.

"Go back to the Castle with your 'Roi qui ne ment pas.'² I will come soon."

Obedient to her command, the little company resumed their quaint song, and, with steps that lagged a little, passed into the

¹ An old-time game.

Castle, leaving their arbitrary leader behind them, with the Seigneur and his squire.

Gerault was silent till the young people had gone. Then he turned to Alixe, but, before he had time to speak, she broke in hastily :

“ Let me go with you to the falcons. You must see Bec-Hardi sit upon my wrist, and attack his *pât* on the rope.”

“ Diable ! — Bec Hardi ! — Thou hast a genius with the birds, Alixe. The *bagard* will not move for me.” Gerault was all attention to her now.

Alixé did not answer his praise, but started quickly forward toward the gate through which she had just come, beyond which was the strip of turf where the falcons lived in summer. Gerault and Courtoise followed her at a slower pace, and she caught some disjointed words spoken by the Seigneur behind her : — “ Rennes ” — “ to-morrow ” — “ horses.”

As these came to her ears, Alixe's steps grew laggard, for she had put the thoughts together, and instantly her mood changed from golden irresponsibility to dull and dreary melancholy. For a long time she had

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concealed in her heart the deep sorrow that she felt at the prospective loss of her life-playmate, Laure, now actually gone, and gone forever. She had resigned herself to the thought of solitary adventures on moor and cliff, and lonely sails on the breezy, treacherous bay, in a more than treacherous boat,—such wild and risky amusements as she and the daughter of *Le Crépuscule* had loved to indulge together. Laure was gone, and she had kept herself from tears. But now—now, at these words of Gerault's, there suddenly rose before her a vivid picture of life in the Castle without either brother or sister. Toward Gerault she had no such feeling as that which she had held for Laure. He was a man to her, and the fact made a vast difference. At times she entertained for him a violent enthusiasm; at other times she treated him with infinite scorn. But till now she had never confessed, even to herself, how much interest he had added to the monotonous Castle life. Considering her wayward nature, it was certainly anomalous that, in her first rush of displeasure, there came to her the thought of Eleanore, the mother now doubly

bereft. And for madame she felt a sympathy that was entirely new.

Gerault and his squire reached the outdoor falconry before Alixe, whom they perceived to have fallen into one of her sudden reveries. Accustomed to her rapid changes of mood, neither man took much heed of her slow steps and bent head. And when she reached the falconry and saw the birds, her interest in them brought over her again a wave of animation.

The outdoor falconry was a long strip of turf that lay between the flower-terrace and the kitchen-garden. Into this turf had been driven about twenty heavy stakes, to which were nailed wooden cross-pieces. On nearly every one of these a falcon perched, and a strong cord, tied about one leg, fastened each to his own stake. At sight of their master, whom they knew perfectly well, all the birds set up a peculiar, harsh cry, at the same time eagerly flapping their wings, appealing, as best they could, for an hour or two of freedom. Alixe ran at once down to the end of the second row of stakes, where sat a half-grown bird, striking viciously at his perch with his iron beak.

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Courtoise and Gerault ceased their conversation when Alixe went up to this bird and addressed it in a curious jargon of Latin and Breton-French. Courtoise betrayed an admiring interest when she stooped to lay her hand on the bird's feathers; and Gerault called involuntarily, —

“Have a care, Alixe!”

The girl, however, had her way with the creature. At sound of her voice it became attentive. At the touch of her hand it half raised its wings, the motion indicating expectant delight. In a moment more it had hopped upon the girl's wrist, and sat there, swaying and preening contentedly.

“Sang Dieu, Alixe, thou hast done that well! Thou sayest he will also attack the *pât* from your hand?”

Alixé merely nodded. To all appearances, she was wholly engrossed with the bird, which she continued to handle. Gerault and Courtoise had come close to her side, though the falcon betrayed its displeasure at their approach. All three of them had been silent for some seconds, when Alixe turned her green eyes upon the Seigneur, and, looking

at him with a glance that carried discomfort with it, said in a very precise and cutting tone :

“ So you leave *Le Crépuscule* to-morrow, Gerault ? And for how long ? ”

“ That I cannot tell,” answered Gerault, exhibiting no annoyance. “ For as long a time as Duke Jean will accept my services.”

“ Ah ! then there will be fighting. I had not heard of a war. Tell me of it.”

Gerault became suddenly embarrassed and correspondingly displeased. “ Of what import can it be to you, a woman, whether there is war or peace ? ” he inquired.

“ Oh, there is great import.”

“ Prithée, what may it be ? ”

“ This : that an there were indeed a war thou mightest be forgiven thy great selfishness in going forth to pleasure, leaving thy mother here in her loneliness and sorrow ; whereas — ”

“ Silence, Alixe ! Thine insolence merits the whip,” cried Courtoise.

“ Peace, boy ! ” said Gerault, shortly, and forthwith turned again to the demoiselle. “ And is not my mother long accustomed to this life, and well content with it ? Is she not

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lady of a great castle, mistress of enviable estates? Hath she not a position to be proud of? From her speech and thine one might think —” he snapped his fingers impatiently. — “Come you with me, Alixe. Let us walk here together on the turf, while I say to you certain things. Thou, Courtoise, return to the Castle if thou wilt.”

The squire, however, chose to remain in the field, and stood leaning against the wall, watching the falcons at his feet, and whistling under his breath for his own amusement. Alixe replaced Bec-Hardi, screaming angrily and flapping its wings, and moved off beside Gerault, her long red houppelande and mantle trailing upon the grass round her feet, the veil from her filet flowing behind her nearly to the ground. Long time these two, Lord of Le Crépuscule and his almost sister, walked together in the sunny light of the late afternoon. And long Courtoise the squire watched them as they went. Although Gerault had said, somewhat in ire, that he had a matter to speak of with her, it was Alixe that talked the most, and from his manner it could be seen that Gerault was fallen very much under the

influence of her peculiar insistence. What it was they spoke of, Courtoise could only guess — and fear. For, though he might hold in his heart some sympathy with madame in her loneliness, yet the squire was a man, and young; and his young thoughts drew with delight the picture of Rennes' gayeties in the summer-time, when no war was toward and the court alive with merriment. Indeed, it was not very wonderful that he prayed to be off on the morrow; but the occasional glimpse that he got of his lord's face carried doubt into his heart.

As the squire stood there by the wall, musing, Madame Eleanore herself came out of the courtyard into the field. Her rosary hung from her waist, and in her hand was a little volume of Latin prayers. In some way, of which she was probably unconscious, the placid manner of her as she came into the field for her evening walk caused Courtoise's idle dreams of gayety to vanish away, and the present, so tinged with the spirit of sweet melancholy, to become the only reality. The squire at once advanced toward his lady, while, ere he reached her, Alixe and Gerault had halted at her side.

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“Indeed, my mother, thou art well come hither at this time. Prithee join us in our walk. For some time past Alixe and I have been speaking of thee. See, the air is sweet, for it comes off the fields to-night.”

“Indeed, ’t is sweet — sweeter than summer,” said Eleanore, smiling as she joined the twain. “But mayhap I shall break your pleasure by coming with you, for you are gay and young, and I —”

They moved on without having noticed him, and Courtoise lost the rest of Eleanore’s speech. But the squire remained in the field, watching the three move back and forth in the deepening dusk. When they came toward him for the last time, and passed through the gate in the north wall, returning to the Castle, all three faces were as calm as madame’s, and Courtoise permitted himself only one sigh for the lost summer at Rennes.

Oddly enough, the squire’s regrets proved to be premature, for immediately after the evening meal he was summoned by Gerault to the Seigneur’s room, to make ready for the journey. Gerault did not deign to inform his squire of the substance of his talk in the fields,

but from the tranquillity of his manner Courtoise could not but perceive that everything had gone well. It was a late hour when all the necessary preparations had been made ; and then the two, lord and squire, went together to the chapel and were there confessed by Anselm, the steward-priest ; after which they bade each other a good-night, and sought their rest.

By sunrise, next morning, the whole Castle had assembled at the drawbridge, to say God-speed to their departing lord. Madame Eleonore, in bliault, houppelande, mantle, and coif all of black and white, held Gerault's stirrup-cup, and smiled as she spoke with him. There was a chorus of chattering demoiselles and a boyish clattering of swords and little armor-pieces from the young squires, as Gerault buckled on his shield, whereon was wrought the motto and device of Crépuscule. Courtoise had already fastened to his lord the golden spurs. And now the two were mounted and ready, Gerault with lance in rest and white reins gathered on his horse's neck ; Courtoise, brimming with delight, now and then giving his steed a heel in flank that caused him to rear and curvet with graceful spirit. For the last

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time Gerault bent to his mother's lips, and for the last time he looked vainly over the company for a glimpse of Alixe, his recent mentor. Finally his spurs went home. The drawbridge was down before him, the portcullis raised. Amid a chorus of farewell cries, he and Courtoise swept away together, over the bridge and down the long, gentle hill, and out upon the Rennes road, which, at some twelve miles from Le Crépuscule, passed the priory-convent of Les Vierges de la Madeleine.

When the twain were gone, and the group prepared to disperse, — the squires-at-arms to their sword-practice under the captain of the keep, the sighing demoiselles to their long morning of weaving and embroidery, — Alixe suddenly appeared from the watch-tower close at hand, inquiring for Madame Eleanore.

“Methinks she hath retreated to her room, to say her prayers for the Seigneur's safe journey,” Berthe told her. And Alixe, with a nod of thanks, ran to the Castle, and ascended to madame's room.

The door was open, for madame was not at prayer. She stood at the open window, look-

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ing out upon the sea. Alixe could not see her face, but from the line of her shoulders she read much of her lady's heart.

"Madame," she said, in a half-whisper.

Eleanore turned quickly. "Alixe!"

"Madame Eleanore — mother —"

A terrible sob broke from the older woman's throat, and suddenly she fell upon her knees beside a wooden settle, and, burying her face in her hands, finally gave way to her desolation. Alixe, who had opened her heart, now comforted her as best she could, soothing her, caressing her, whispering to her in a magnetic, gentle voice, till madame's grief had been nearly washed away. Then the young girl said, softly, in her ear:

"Think, madame! 't is now but eleven days till thou mayest ride out to Laure at the priory. And there thou canst talk with her alone, and for as long as thou wilt. Also, when her novitiate is at an end, she may come here to thee, once in a fortnight, for so the Mother-prioress hath said."

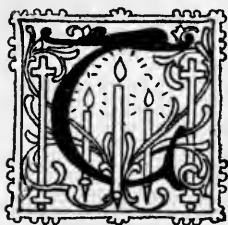
Eleanore held Alixe's hand close to her breast, and while she stroked it, a little convulsively, she said, with returning self-control:

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“I thank thee — I thank thee — Alixe, for thy good comfort.” Then, in a different tone, she added, with a little sigh: “Eleven days — eleven ages — how many others have I still to spend — alone?”

CHAPTER TWO

THE SILENCE OF YOUTH



THE priory-convent of the Virgins of the Magdalen was as old as any nunnery in Brittany of its repute. It had been founded in the early days of the tenth Louis of France and his good lady of Burgundy, long before the death of the last of the Dreux lords of the dukedom. It was celebrated for more than its age, however; for through three centuries it had held in ecclesiastic Brittany, for its wealth, its exclusiveness, and, above either of these things, its unswerving chastity, a place as unique as it was gratifying. In the year 1381 no breath of scandal had ever disturbed its fragrant atmosphere. Moreover, though this was a fact not much regarded by people in authority, it was a remarkably comfortable

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little house, of excellent architecture and ample room for the practice of any amount of worship. Its situation, however, was lonely. It stood nearly at the end of the Rennes coast road, on the outskirts of a thick forest, twenty miles from the town of St. Nazaire-by-the-sea, and twelve from the Chateau of Le Crépuscule. And it was here, in this pleasant if austere retreat, that many a noble lady of Laval and Crépuscule had ended her youth and worn her life away in the endeavor to attain undying sanctity.

On a certain afternoon in this mid-spring of 1381, the very day, indeed, that Lord Gerault took to the Rennes road to ease his ennui, a little company of nuns sat out in the convent garden, embroidering away their recreation time. The day was exquisite: sunny, a little chilly, its breeze laden with the rare perfume of awakening summer. The garden, at this season of the year, was a place of wondrous beauty, redolent of rich, pregnant soil, and all shimmering with the misty green of tender grass and countless leaf-buds, from the midst of which a few flowers, pale primroses and crocuses and a hyacinth or two,

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peered forth, starring the new-planted beds with the first fruits of this new union of earth and sky.

The spirit of the spring ruled supreme over all natural things. Only the creatures of God, the self-consecrated nuns, sat in the midst of this wonder of the young world, untouched by it. Heedless to the uttermost of this greatest of worldly blessings, they sat plying their needles in and out of their bright-colored, ecclesiastical fabrics, listening, in their dull and dreamy way, to the voice of one of their number who was droning out to them for the thousandth time the old and long-familiar laws of their order, expressed in the "Rhymed Rule of St. Benedict." One only among them seemed not of their mood. This was a young girl, white-robed like all the rest, her unveiled head proclaiming her novitiate. As became her station she bent decorously to her task, and it had taken a close observer to see and read all the little signs she gave of consciousness of the world around her, the green, growing things, and the liquid bird-songs that came trilling out of the forest near at hand. Probably not even the most skilled of readers could have recog-

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nized all the meaning in the long, slow looks, half wondrous and half probing, with which, every now and again, she traversed the circle of faces about her. Her self-restraint was very nearly flawless, and was successfully maintained throughout the long period of recreation ; so that not one of her companions guessed the relief she felt when the first clang of the vesper-bell roused them from their trance-like dulness. But the young girl wondered a little at herself when she perceived that her brows were damp with the sweat of the constraint.

At this time Laure of Le Crépuscule was sixteen years of age, and pretty as a flower to look upon. She was slim and white-faced, with immense, limpid brown eyes that were wont to move rather slowly, and burnished brown hair hanging in twists to her knees : an object for men to rave over, had any man worth so calling ever set eyes upon her. She was young enough and pure enough to be of unquestioning innocence ; and, until now, the fiery life in her had found sufficient outlet in unlimited bodily exercise. She had seen nothing of real life, and never dreamed of the talent she possessed for it. It was from her

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own heart that the wish to consecrate herself to the eternal worship of God had come; for she believed that in this way she should find a haven for those terrible and fathomless mental storms of which she had weathered many in her young life, and of which her own mother never so much as dreamed. Utterly ignorant of her real self, she was yet a girl of strong intellect, of great versatility, of overweening passions, and withal as feminine a creature as the Creator ever fashioned. Both her temperament and her appearance more resembled the dwellers of the far South—Provence or even Navarre—than the children of the rugged, chilly shores of northern Brittany; for her skin had the dark, creamy pallor of the South, and her eyes held none of the keen fire that glows in the North, while her hair grew low above her smooth, white brow.

Laure's temperament was dramatically mobile. She adapted herself almost unconsciously to any mode or situation of life, and this, though she did not know it, was all that she was doing now. It was with real, if subdued pleasure that she went through the services of the day. From matins, which, at this period

of the year, began at the cheerless hour of four in the morning, till compline, at eight in the evening, when the church bell tolled the end of another day of prayer, Laure's nature was under a kind of religious spell, which she and those about her had joyfully interpreted as a true vocation.

The first eleven days of Laure's convent life passed away in comparative calmness; and she found no weariness in them. On the twelfth, Madame Eleanore rode in from *Le Crépuscule* to see her daughter. She was admitted to the convent as speedily as if the little lay sister had known the devouring eagerness of the mother-heart; and because she was a lady of consequence, and because she was known to be very generous to the Church, and especially because the Bishop of St. Nazaire was her close friend, she was not left to wait in the reception-room, but conducted straight to the Prioress' cell.

Mère Piteuse received Madame Eleanore with anxious cordiality. After their greetings the guest seated herself, and was obliged to keep silence for a moment before she could ask quietly, —

“And Laure, Reverend Mother,—how fares my child? Is she content with you?” Eleanore’s heart throbbed with unconfessed hope as she asked this question. For if Laure was *not* content, she might return at will to the Castle, her home, and her mother’s heart.

But the Prioress returned Eleanore’s look with a smile of satisfaction. “In a moment Laure will come hither. I have sent for her. Then thou shalt learn from her own lips how well her life goes. Never, I think, hath our priory received a new daughter that showed herself so happy in her vocation. We shall call her name Angelique at her consecration.”

Eleanore felt her body grow cold, and her head swim. Her face, however, betrayed nothing. Her little girl, then, was really gone! Laure, the wild bird, was tamable. She—*could* she become “Angelique”?

Neither madame nor the Prioress spoke again till there was a sound of gentle footsteps in the corridor, followed by a light tap on the wooden door of the cell.

“Enter!” cried the Prioress; and Laure came quietly in.

First of all she bowed to Mère Piteuse.

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Then, as Eleanore involuntarily held out her arms, the girl went into them, and kissed her mother with a warmth and a sweetness that perhaps Eleanore had not known from her before. At the same moment the Prioress rose quietly, and left the room. The instant that she was gone, Eleanore seized the girl in a still closer embrace, and held her tightly and more tightly to her breast.

“Laure, my darling! Laure, my sweet child! how hath my heart yearned for thee! How hath thy name lain ever on my lips while I slept, and been enshrined in my heart by day!”

The young girl's arms wound themselves about her mother's neck, and she laid her head upon that shoulder where it had been wont to rest in her babyhood. And Laure sighed a little, not unhappily, but like a child tired of play.

“Laure, wilt thou remain here in the convent? Art thou happy? Dost thou wish it, or wilt thou come home again to Crépuscule?”

A sudden image of the gray Castle, with its vast hall, and the great fire blazing in the chimney-place within, and all the well-known

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figures assembled there for a meal, — Alixe, Gerault, the demoiselles and young squires headed by Courtoise, and the burly men-at-arms that had played with her and carried her about as a little child, — all the long-familiar, comfortable scenes of her old life came before the girl's eye. And then — then she drew a little breath and answered her mother, unfaltering: " 'Tis beautiful here, and sweet and holy withal. I am content, dear mother. I will remain."

" And hast thou, then, the vocation in thy heart, whereby some souls are claimed of God from birth to death, and find the utmost of their happiness in His communion? "

Laure's great eyes fixed themselves upon the mother's sad face as she replied again, very softly: " Yea, my mother. That, from my heart, do I believe."

Eleanore sighed deeply, and then quickly smiled again. " Think not that I mourn, my daughter, for having yielded thee up to the Church. May this blessed spirit remain in thee, bringing thee everlasting peace."

Then, while Laure still clung to her, the mother herself put the closely clasped arms

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away from her neck, and drew the novice to her feet. "Now, my Laure, I must go. But my thoughts are still left with thee."

"But thou wilt come, mother? — In ten days' time thou wilt come to me again?"

"Yea, sith it is permitted by the rules that I see thee once more, I will surely come," she answered quietly.

"Laure will greatly rejoice at thy coming," said the Prioress, gently, from the doorway.

So Eleanore renewed her promise, and shortly after rode away from the priory gate, into the thick wood through which ran the road to Crépuscule.

Her mother's visit brought Laure two days of extremest homesickness and yearning. Then she regained her independence, and began to find a new delight in her surroundings. The perfect peace of it, the infinite, delightful detail of worship, with its multifarious candle-points, and its continual clouds of fragrant incense, all wrought together into a life of undeviating regularity, brought to the novice a sense of peculiar safety and freedom from vexation or care that was quite new to her, for all her youth. The day began with matins, repeated

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by each nun alone in her cell. Laure had been given a room in a corner of the priory, at the very end of the corridor of novices, and she gained therefrom an added sense of exclusiveness and seclusion. She had not once been late in her answer to the matins bell, and the mistress of novices, passing Laure's cell on her first round of the day, had never failed to find her praying. Laure came of a pious house, and had known her prayers, all the forms of them, long before she entered the priory. They required no thought in the repetition, and therefore there was many a morning when she played the parrot at her desk, either too sleepy, or too much occupied with thoughts and dreams, to heed the familiar addresses to God. This was not entirely a fault, perhaps. The mornings came very early in these days, and there were wonderful things to be seen through her cell-window. She saw the dawn, golden-girdled, garbed in flowing rose-color, unlock the eastern portals of the sky. She saw stars and moon glimmer faintly and more faint, and finally sink to rest under the high, clear green of the morning heaven. Last of all, over the feathery line of trees that made a horizon for her at her cell-

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window, she could see the first dazzling ladder of the sun lifted up to lean against the east. And then Laure would long for the murmur of devotion to be stilled in the Abbey, for sun-mists were filling the Heavens, and from the forest the bird-chorus rose to a full-throated *tutti*, in its hymn of glorification to the new day.

This morning benediction that she found, Laure kept to herself by day, and carried with her until dark. There was no one in the priory to whom she could have confided her pleasure, for there was none in the Abbey that had her love, or, indeed, any love at all, for the world that God had made for Himself and for mankind. The day-tasks also had their pleasures for the novice. She learned, in time, that she was not obliged to fill her recreation hours with embroidery; but that she might sleep, or pray, or work in the garden, or do whatever a quiet fancy should select. So she chose to befriend the soil, and played with it as if it were a tender companion. And after her exercise here, the rest of the day, nones, vespers, supper, confession, and compline, melted away almost

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unheeded, leaving her at last to the sweet-breathed night, and to a sleep as dreamless and as sound as that of any baby.

In this most simple way, without any untoward happening, without her once leaving the priory, the days flowed on, spring melted into summer, and Laure found herself possessed of an infinite and ever-increasing content, the great secret of which probably lay in the fact that every waking hour had its occupation. She had entered her new life in the most beautiful time of the year, and, heedless of this, began, in her delusive happiness, to wonder why, long ago, the whole world had not taken to such existence. She had plenty of time to indulge in dreams, — vague and fragile dreams of the great world and the people dwelling therein, that she should never come to know. But the fact that she could never know them did not come home to her with the force of a deprivation. She did not feel herself to be a hopeless prisoner. She was not professed; and the fact that there still remained to her a free choice easily kept her from any over-vivid perception of the eternal dulness of convent life.

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Once in two weeks Madame Eleanore came to see her, and if these visits were bitter to the mother, Laure never guessed it. Also, from time to time, the professed nuns would leave the convent for a day or two at a time, on what errands the novices were not told. But Laure knew that similar privileges would be hers after her profession.

The summer, in its fulness and beauty, passed away. Purple autumn came and went. And one day, in the first cold weather, Laure was summoned to the Mother-prioress' room, where she was told a proud thing. It was that, if she chose profession at the end of her novitiate, which would come in the Christmas season, her consecration might take place at the same time, by special permission from the highest power; for, by ordinary ecclesiastic law, she was still many years too young for this consummation of the celibate life. But if she so chose, his Grace the Bishop of St. Nazaire would perform the ceremony of sanctification on the twenty-sixth of December, directly after the forty-eight-hour vigil of the birth of the Christ.

Laure heard this news with every appear-

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ance and every expression of delight; and when she returned to the church for tierce and morning mass, she tried, all through the service, to bring herself face to face with herself, to appreciate, as she was conscious that she must, sooner or later, the intense gravity of her position. But for some reason, by some failure of concentrative force, she could not bring her mind to the point of understanding. Over and over again her thoughts slid around that one fact that she knew she must try to realize,—how, after the giving of her final pledge, there could be no turning back, there could be no escape, while she should live, from this life of prayer. She did not appreciate it at all. She only remembered that she had been very contented here, and that the days were never long.

In the weeks that followed her talk with Mère Piteuse, Laure enacted this same scene of effort with herself many times, always futilely. As a matter of fact, it was too grave a responsibility to put upon the shoulders of a child in years and a less than child in experience. But this unfairness was one of

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the prerogatives of monasticism, unappreciated to this day.

Christmas time drew near; and gradually Laure dropped her efforts toward understanding and fell into dreams of a varied and complex, if unimportant, nature. She was to be professed alone, on the day after Christmas. No novice had entered the convent within three months of her, and, moreover, her birth and position made it desirable that she should be surrounded by a little extra pomp; for, although Laure did not know it, she was much looked up to by the nuns of humbler birth, and universally regarded as a future prioress of the house. During the last days of her novitiate the young girl was treated with peculiar reverence and consideration, and she was given a good deal of time for solitary reflection and prayer. Every day she was summoned to the cell of the Prioress, who herself gave the girl good counsel and instruction upon the higher life; while so much general attention was paid her that Laure became a little astonished at her own importance.

In the first three weeks of December Madame Eleanore did not come at all to see

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her daughter, and Laure grew lonely for her. She suspected nothing of her mother's heart-sickness over the approaching ceremony that was to cut her child off from her forever; and, indeed, had Laure been told of the mother-feeling, she could not have understood it.

On the afternoon of the twenty-third day of December the novice was kneeling in her cell, supposedly at prayer, in reality indulging in a rather forlorn and melancholy reverie. It was the hour of recreation; and the convent was very quiet, for most of the nuns were sleeping, in preparation for the strain of the forty-eight-hour Christmas service. The stillness brought a chill to Laure's heart, and she was near to tears, when her door was suddenly pushed open, and some one halted there. Laure turned quickly enough to see the white-robed Prioress disappear, closing the door behind a figure that remained motionless inside the threshold.

"My mother!" cried Laure, springing to her feet.

"Laure," was the quivering response, as Eleanore held out her arms.

The dreamer, suddenly become a little child,

went into the mother-clasp, her pristine home, and was half carried over to the only seat in the room, — a wooden tabouret, large enough for only one. Upon this Eleanore seated herself, while Laure sank to the floor beside her, huddling close to the human warmth of her mother, her head lying in that mother's lap, both hands held tightly in the larger, stronger, older ones.

“Laure — my Laure — my little Laure!” was all that, at this time, madame could force her lips to say. And hearing it, the girl, suddenly overwrought and overswept with repressed yearning for home love, all at once burst into a convulsive flood of tears.

Some moments passed, and the sobs, instead of diminishing, began to increase in violence, till Eleanore became alarmed. Certain unexpressed fears took possession of her. She made no effort to bring them into definite order in her mind. They merely joined themselves to a shadow that had long since come upon her in the form of a question: What, in bare reality, was this vast monster called “the Church”? Why had it a right to step thus between mother and child? How could

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such a thing be called holy? Filled with this idea, and realizing to the full how desperately short was her chance, Eleanore set herself to work, through every means known to her, to quiet Laure, to stop her tears, and to gain her earnest attention.

Under madame's determined calm, it was not long before Laure was brought back to self-control. And when she was quiet, the mother, sitting very straight in her place, drew the girl to her feet, and, holding her fast by the hand, while she looked steadily into the clear, brown eyes, she asked, slowly, with an emphasis born of her desperation,—

“Laure, is it indeed in thy heart to remain, of thy free will and desire, forever in this house, forsaking all that was dear to thee of youth and love, and freedom, in thy home, *Le Crépuscule*?”

Laure, while she looked at her mother, gave a sudden sigh, and her face became staring pale. Eleanore strove to fathom her daughter's look, but could know nothing of the flood of natural desire and youth that was oversweeping the girl. Laure's resistance against it was silence. She sat still, cowed

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and bent, while the noise of the waters filled her ears, and her heart was near to bursting with suffocation and yearning. Before this silence, however, these passionate moments gradually ebbed away. The wave retreated, and her heart shut tight. Words and phrases from Holy Scriptures, books of prayer, and St. Benedict's Rule, came crowding to her, and she considered to herself how she might show her mother the sin of her suggestion. But, as she had kept silence one way, so now she practised it in the other. After the long pause her voice found itself in three words only, —

“My mother! — madame!”

Eleanore's eyes fell. Her hope was gone. For the thousandth time her religion rose to shame her, before her child, for the absorbing love of her motherhood. Presently Laure, standing before her, more like her judge than like the disconsolate creature she had so lately comforted, spoke again, —

“Madame, here in this place have I found contentment. There is no sorrow and no desire when one lives but to pray and sleep, and wake and pray again. God lives here continually in our hearts and He begets in us the

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love that we bear for each other. Moreover, after my profession and consecration, much freedom will be added to my life. I shall have no more long hours of instruction, nor shall I be called on to do the bidding of any one save perhaps that of the Reverend Mother. And whereas thou ridest hither to me each fortnight, I, after my vow, may go instead to thee, to see thee and mine ancient home.—Nay, mother, forgive me that I rebuke thy words; but thou must not urge me thus, for my spirit is not as yet very strong or very much tried, and is like to break under temptation.”

Dry-eyed and straight-lipped, Eleanore rose from her place and kissed her daughter, saying, —

“This is farewell, dear child, till thou shalt come home to me for the first time after thy wedding with Heaven. My humble and earthly blessing be upon thee, — and mayst thou find thy spirit strong, my Laure, when thou shalt have need of it; as, in God’s time, thou surely wilt.”

Once again the mother kissed her girl — kissed her in final renunciation. Laure felt a

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burning upon her brow long after madame had left the room. Eleanore's last words also somewhat affected the novice, — brought her a dim sense of uneasiness and foreboding. But it was in silence that she saw the black-robed figure leave the cell, and in silence she remained for a long time after she was left alone, thinking over what had passed.

Laure had acted in such perfect sincerity that the wound she inflicted on her mother, and the mortification she put upon her, were neither of them realized. It was not wonderful that the impulses of the girl's heart had been stilled by the unceasing precept of the past months. Her years were naturally powerless to fathom her mother's heart, the heart of her who sees herself completely separated in every interest from the one that has always been nearest and dearest. And so the argument that she conducted within herself after her mother's going was not one of justification of her own act, but — oh, ye gods! — an attempted justification of Eleanore's impiety.

Laure passed the next two days in an odor of extreme sanctity, and hailed with deep inward joy the beginning of the long vigil of the

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birth of the Saviour, on Christmas Eve. She was excused from keeping steadily in church through this protracted service, for the reason that she would be obliged, according to the Rule, to spend the night after her consecration alone in the church, at prayer. Throughout Christmas Day Laure was in a state of repressed nervous excitement. Was not to-morrow to be her wedding-day? Was she not to become what the first Magdalen had never been, — the bride of Christ? Her prayers throughout this day were mingled with thoughts of the highest purity, the most refined spiritual ecstasy, the most shining, uplifted innocence. Tears of joy and of proud humility flowed readily from her eyes, while her mouth was filled with heavenly praises that welled up from her heart.

In the afternoon she was sent away to rest ; for the Mother-prioress was considerate of her strength. Laure did not, however, lie down. Instead, she stood for more than an hour at the window of her cell, looking out over the world, and watching the fine feathery snow-flakes float down through the clear blue air. The earth was wrapped in a mantle whiter than

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her consecration robe and veil. Perhaps it was a shroud. Laure shivered at the thought, while she contemplated the unutterable stillness of all things. Not a sound disturbed this vast scene of death. The tree-boughs bent low under the weight of their pure burden; and when the early evening fell, and vespers chimed out over the valley, the tiny, frozen tears of Heaven still floated through the dark with ever-increasing softness.

It was seven o'clock when Sœur Celeste, the chaplain, came to summon the bride-elect to confession and interrogation with Monseigneur the Bishop of St. Nazaire. As the two women passed together down the long corridor of novices, through the cold cloister and empty refectory and along the passage leading to the chapter, Laure's heart was struck with a chill of fear. How terribly empty the convent was! No one in the refectory, the corridors scarcely lighted, the whole convent utterly silent; for the drone of prayers in the church was inaudible here. She wondered how the terrible vigil progressed, how many nuns had fainted in their fatigue. She thought of anything but the

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matter before her, and was still unprepared when the chaplain left her alone at the door of the chapter.

The Bishop of St. Nazaire was alone in this room, and at Laure's appearance he rose and went to her, taking her by the hand, and not amazed to find her icy cold.

"My daughter!" he said gently; and Laure, looking into his face, was suddenly filled with an ineffable comfort.

She had known the Bishop all her life, for he was her mother's close friend and a constant visitor at *Le Crépuscule*. But never before had she seen him in this fulness of his office, so replete with magnetic spirituality. If the unswervingly narrow tenets of his creed made St. Nazaire too arbitrary where his religion was concerned, and if the geniality of his own nature had, at times, brought upon him in his own home reactions that afterwards rendered necessary the severest penances, at least these two extremes of his life had brought him to a remarkable intermediate balance. Irrespective of his state, he could be defined as a man of the world, of large sympathies, having a broad understanding of human frailty, because of the

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unconquerable weaknesses of his own nature. His ethical code was one of high severity and strict purity ; and he strove with all the power of his spirit to follow it himself, never failing, the while, to excuse the eternal failures of others. And now, as Laure looked up into his large, smooth-shaven face, framed in long fair hair, and lighted by a pair of bright blue eyes that generally regarded the world with a surprising air of trustful innocence, the young novice lost all her sense of desolation, and felt herself suddenly introduced into a secure and unhopèd-for haven.

St. Nazaire himself, examining the young girl's face, and searching her soul therein, knew that at this moment he was nearer to the inmost being of the daughter of *Le Crépuscule* than he should ever be again ; and he felt that no one ever yet had been in a position to probe the depths of her nature as he was going to probe them now. She gave herself up to him as completely as Eleanore had given her once long ago, when, as a new-born infant, she had wailed in his arms at her baptism before the altar in the chapel of the Twilight Castle.

With this strong feeling of mutual confi-

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dence, Laure and the Bishop seated themselves in the chapter of the convent. Confession and stereotyped interrogation were gone through with dutifully, and then followed what Laure had begun to wish for at the first moment of their meeting, — a long and intimate talk upon the life that she should lead as a professed nun. It was a life with which St. Nazaire was as fully conversant as a man could ever be, and he pictured it to Laure as faithfully as he was accustomed to picture Heaven — a heaven of flying men and women carrying in their hands small golden harps — to those that received the last sacrament at his hands. Laure had a vision of long years filled ever fuller of transcendent joy and peace, in which she should never know a wish that her life could not fill, nor a desire beyond more earnest prayers, or a fast a little longer and more rigorous than heretofore. And so skilful was the Bishop in the manipulation of his sombre material, that he got from it remarkable beauties which, impossible as it seems, were as convincing to him as to Laure.

It was late in the evening when the young girl received the episcopal blessing and retired

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through the still nunnery to her cell. But her mind was at perfect rest that night; and she went to sleep to dream of nothing but the happiness and beauty of a consecrated life.

At ten o'clock on the morning of the twenty-sixth day of December, the whole convent assembled in church for high mass, which was to be celebrated by the Bishop of St. Nazaire. To-day the novices were separated from the professed nuns, and the two companies knelt on opposite sides of the church, leaving a broad space between them. The choir was in its place. In the lower choir-stalls sat the Mother-prioress, the sub-prioress, the chaplain and the deacons; while his Grace was in the great chair of honor used by none but him. The only member of the nunnery not present was Laure, who made her appearance just as the bell began to ring for the opening of the mass. She came in from the chapter-house at the far end of the church, and moved slowly up the aisle. Her white robe and full mantle hid her figure and trailed around her on the floor, and her head was crowned with the bridal veil, which covered her face and fell to the ground all around her. In one hand she carried a parch-

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ment scroll on which her vow was inscribed ; and in the other hand she bore the wedding ring.

As she advanced toward the altar every head was turned toward her, and it was seen that she was white as death. But she was also very calm. Indeed she was acting quite mechanically, like one under a hypnotic spell ; and there was no expression whatever on her face as she made her genuflection to the cross, and then turned aside and knelt among the company of novices. She took her usual part in the mass that followed, making no slip in the service, and joining as usual in the singing, with her full contralto voice.

When the benediction had been pronounced from the chancel, there was a pause. No one in the church moved from her knees, and the Bishop remained before the company with his right hand uplifted. Laure raised her eyes, and her body trembled slightly, for her heart was palpitating like running water. When the silence had lasted a seemingly unbearable while, St. Nazaire turned his face to Laure, who rose and went up to him, kneeling again in the chancel. And now, as she spoke, her quiet,

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impressive voice was heard by every nun in the church, —

“Suscipe me, Domine, secundum eloquium tuum et vivam. Et non confundas me in expectatione mea.”

As she finished, Laure’s throat contracted, and she gasped convulsively. Her head swam in a mist, but she knew that the Bishop was questioning her from the catechism, — knew that she was answering him; and then, afterwards, she heard, as from a great distance, the voice of the Bishop praying. At the Amen, St. Nazaire signed to her again, and she rose and stepped forward to his side. Then, turning till she faced the church, she said quite distinctly, though in a low tone, —

“I, Sister Angelique, promise steadfastness, virginity, continuance in virtue, and obedience before God and all His saints, in accordance with the Rule of St. Benedict, in this Priory of Holy Madeleine, in the presence of the Reverend Father Charles, Lord Bishop of St. Nazaire, of the Duchy of Brittany, Lord under the most Christian Duke, Jean de Montfort.”

Thereafter she went up to the altar, and

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there signed her scroll with her new name and the sign of the cross. And there the ring of Heaven was placed upon her finger, and she was declared a bride. For the last time she knelt before the father, who lifted up his hands and consecrated her, after the ancient formula, to the love of her Saviour, the blessing of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost. And then Laure, a professed nun, came down from the holy place, and was received among her sisters and reverently saluted by them.

The ceremony over, all the convent adjourned to the refectory, where a little feast of rejoicing was held in honor of the newly consecrated one. And after this, at an early hour of the afternoon, Laure was conducted to her cell, and her ten days of retirement began. All that afternoon, overcome with the strain of the past few days, the young girl slept. She woke only when the Sœur Eloise, a stout and stupid little nun, but a few weeks since made a lay sister, came up to her with bread and milk. When she had eaten and was alone again, she sat for a long time in her dark cell, looking out upon the starry night, and wondering vaguely over her long future. Presently the

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bell for the end of confession rang out, and, knowing that it was time, she rose and went through the convent, and into the vast church. The last of the nuns had left it and gone to seek her rest. Only the sub-prioress remained, waiting for Laure. Seeing her come, the older nun saluted her silently, and then moved away toward the dimly lighted chapter. In the doorway of this room she turned to look back at the white figure standing in the dimly lighted, incense-reeking aisle ; and then, with a faint sigh of memory, she extinguished all the chapter lights, bowed to the little crucifix hanging in that room, and went her way to bed.

Laure was left alone in the great, dusky House of God. Where she knelt, before the shrine of St. Joseph, two candles burned. All around her was darkness — silence — solitude. Awed and wide-eyed, she forced herself to kneel upon the stones, and her mind vaguely sought a prayer. But thoughts of Heaven refused to come. Her Bridegroom was very far away. She felt a cold weight settling slowly down upon her heart, and she trembled, and her brows grew damp with chilly dew. Many

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thoughts came and went. She remembered afterwards to have had a very distinct vision of Alixe, standing alone upon a great cliff a mile from Le Crépuscule, with a wild sea-wind blowing her hair and her mantle, and white gulls veering about her head. For an instant, a wild longing flamed up through her soul. Setting her lips, she tried to force her mind back again to God. One — two — three faltering, reverent words were uttered by her. Then Laure du Crépuscule started wildly to her feet.

“God! Oh, God! I am imprisoned! I am captive! I am captive forever! God! Oh, God!”

As these wild cries echoed through the vaulted roof, she threw herself passionately to the floor and lay there helpless, while the wave of merciless realization swept over her. Then her hands wandered along the stones of the floor, and her cheek followed them, and she clutched at the cold, damp granite, in a vain, vague search for her mother's breast.

CHAPTER THREE

FLAMMECŒUR



THE New Year had come: a time of highest festival in Brittany, when the land was alive with merriment and gifts and legends and grewsome tales. It was St. Sylvester's Eve, when, as all men knew, the waves of the Atlantic for once defied their barriers and struggled up the towering cliffs, eager to meet, halfway, the descending dolmens, permitted once in the year to leave unguarded the deep earth-treasures, that they might quench their furious thirst in the sea. And on that night half the peasants of Brittany lay awake, speculating on the vast wealth that might be theirs if they were but to arise and seek out some monster dolmen and wait beside it till the immense rock rolled away from its hole, leaving a pit of gold and gems open to the

clutching hands of the world-man. But fear of the demoniac return of these same rolling rocks kept most of the dreamers safe within their beds during the fateful midnight hour, though of the luck of the few daring ones, there were, nay, still are, many veracious tales.

Le Crépuscule, no less than the surrounding countryside, participated in the interest of these supernatural matters ; but the old Château had real affairs of feast and frolic to occupy it also. The great New Year's dinner was the most lavish that the Castle gave in the twelve-month, and this year, in spite of its depleted household, there was no exception made to the general rule. The great tables were set in the central hall and loaded with every sort of food and drink, while kitchen fires roared about their juicy meats, and in the chimney-piece of the hall an ox was roasted whole before the flames. Ordinarily the dinner hour at the Castle was half-past eleven in the morning ; but on feast days it was changed to four in the afternoon, and the merriment was then kept up till the last woman had retired, and the last man found a pillow on the rushes that strewed the floor.

On this New Year's eve there were, as

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usual, two great tables set ; for to-night not only all the retainers of the Castle, but also half a hundred of the tenantry from the estates, claimed the privilege of their fealty and came to eat at the house of their lord, sitting below his salt, breaking his bread, supping his beer, and talking and laughing and drinking each till he could no more.

Madame Eleanore was always present at this feast, as a matter of duty and of graciousness. She sat to-night at the head of the board, with an empty place beside her for Gerault. Alixe was upon her right hand, and one of the young squires-at-arms upon her left ; and in the general hubbub of the feast none of the peasant boors noticed how persistent a silence reigned at that end of the table, nor how wearily sad was the expression of their lady's face.

This was the first feast in many years at which the Bishop of St. Nazaire had not been present ; but he had not come to *Le Crépuscule* since Laure's consecration, and madame had given up hoping for his arrival. Darkness had fallen some time since, and the hour was growing late. This could be told from the increased noise at the table. Puddings and crumcakes

had been finished, and the men of the company were turning their attention exclusively to the liquor—beer and wine—which had been brought up to the hall in great casks, from which each might help himself. David le petit, the jester, ran up and down on the table, waving a black wand and shouting verses at the company. There was a universal clamor and howling of laughter and song, which madame heard with ever-increasing weariness and displeasure, though the demoiselles showed no such signs of fatigue.

Suddenly, through the tumult, madame caught a sound that made her lift her head and half rise from her chair, listening intently. There had been a sound of horses' hoofs on the courtyard stones.

"'T is St. Nazaire at last," she whispered to Alixe. "Now we shall hear of— Go thou thyself, Alixe, and fetch hither fresh meat and a pasty and a flagon of the best wine. Monseigneur must be weary. He shall sit here at my side —"

Alixé rose obediently and hurried away on her errand; and while she was gone there came a clamor at the door. A burly henchman

sprang up and lurched forward to open it, peering out into the darkness. Those in the room heard a little ejaculation, and then there entered a new-comer with some one else beside him. Neither was the Bishop of St. Nazaire. Both of them were young, — one, indeed, no more than a boy, wearing an esquire's jerkin, hosen, cap, and mantle, and carrying only a short dirk in his belt. The other, who came forward into the full light of the lamps and torches, was a young man of six and twenty or thereabouts, lean and tall and graceful, clad in half armor, but clean-shaved, like a woman. His face had the look of the South in it, his eyes were piercingly dark, and his waving hair as black as the night. In their first glance at the new-comer, most in the room took notice that his spurs were not gilt; but soon a maid spied out that the little squire carried on his back a lute, strung on a ribbon, and then the stranger's profession was plain.

This general examination lasted but the matter of a few seconds. Then Madame Eleonore rose, and the stranger saluted her with a grace that became him well, and began to speak in a mellow voice, —

“Madame la Châtelaine, give thee God’s greeting! I hight Bertrand Flammeccœur, singer of Provence, the land of the trouvère; and now find myself a most weary traveller through this chilly land. Here —” indicating his follower with two slim fingers — “is my squire, Yvain. We come to-day from the Castle of Laval, in the South, where, in the high hospitality of its lord, we have sojourned for some weeks. There, indeed, I sang in half a score of tenzons with one Le Fleurie, an able singer. But now, to-night, inasmuch as we are weary with long riding, empty for food, numb with cold, and have found the drawbridge of this Castle down, we make bold to crave shelter for the night, and a manchet of bread to comfort our stomachs withal,” and the trouvère bent his body in a graceful obeisance; while Eleanore, smiling her hospitality, stepped forward a little from where she stood.

“It is the Breton custom, Sir Trouvère, to leave the drawbridge down during the holy weeks of Christmas and Easter; and in those days any may obtain food and shelter among us. Thou and thy squire, however, are doubly welcome, coming as ye do from our cousins of

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Laval, in which house I, Eleanore du Crépuscule, was born. In the name of my son, the Seigneur Gerault, I return you God's greeting, and pray you to make this Chateau your home. Now, sith ye are well weary and anhungered, let your boy rest him there among my squires, while you come here and sit and eat."

Thereupon little Yvain, after a bow, ran eagerly to the place indicated to him; and Flammeœur, smiling, went forward at madame's invitation toward the place at her side. Ere he reached it, Alixe, who had been in the kitchens and thus missed the stranger's entrance, came into the hall, bearing with her a wooden tray containing food and red wine. At sight of the stranger she halted suddenly, and as suddenly he paused to make her reverence; for by her dress he knew her to be no serving-wench. In the instant that their glances met, her green and brilliant eyes flashed a flame of fire into his dark ones; and curiously enough, a color rose in the pale cheeks of the man ere Alixe had thought to catch the flush of maiden modesty. Perhaps no one in the room had noted the contretemps. At any rate, Flammeœur, taking a quick glance to see,

found none looking at him in more than ordinary curiosity; whereupon his debonair self-possession flew back to him, and, turning again to Madame Eleanore, he presently sat down to table and began his meal. While he ate, and his appetite was excellent, he found space to converse with every one about him; and had a smile for all, from madame to the shyest of the demoiselles. Out of courtesy for their hospitality, he gave a somewhat careless and rambling but nevertheless highly entertaining account of some of his wanderings, and was amused to see how the young demoiselles hung on his words. Only upon Alixe did he waste his efforts, for she paid scant attention to him, listening just enough to escape the charge of rudeness. And Flammeccœur was man enough and vain enough to get himself into something of a pique about her in this first hour of his coming to Le Crépuscule.

When the stranger had had his say, and proved himself sufficiently "trouvère," the general after-feast of song and story began. Both tale and song were of that day,—broad enough for modern ears, but of their time unusually mild, and of the character that was

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to be heard from ladies' lips. Burliest henchman and slenderest squire alike tuned his verse for the ears of Madame Eleanore to hear ; and the wanderer, Flammeccœur, noted this fact astutely, and so much approved of it that, while dwarf David's fairy tale went on, he took a quick resolve that he would make a temporary home for himself in this Castle.

In the course of time Flammeccœur was asked for a song. Yvain brought his lute to him, and he tuned the instrument while he pleaded excuse from a long chanson. When he began, however, his voice showed small sign of fatigue. He sang a low, swinging melody of his own composing, fitted to words once used in a Court of Love in the south, — a delicate bit of versification dealing with dreams. And so delicately did he perform his task that perfect silence followed its close.

A moment later there was a sharp round of applause ; for these Bretons had never heard such a chansonette in all their cold-country lives. Before anything more could be demanded, Flammeccœur, satisfied with the impression already made, sprang to his feet, and turned to Eleanore, saying : " Lady, I crave

permission for me and my squire to seek our rest. We have ridden many leagues to-day, and at early dawn must be up and off again."

Eleanore rose and gave him her hand to kiss. "Sieur Flammeccœur, we render thee thanks for our pleasure, and give ye God's sleep. Hither, Foulque! Light the Sieur Trouvère and his boy to thy room, and sleep thou this night with Robert Meloc."

The young squire bowed and fetched a torch from the wall. Yvain came running to his master's side; and presently, to the deep regret of all the demoiselles, the three disappeared into the "long room," from which a hallway led to the squires' rooms.

In spite of Bertrand's words about his early departure on the following morning, he and Yvain did not go that day. Neither did they depart on the next, nor within that week. On the morning after his arrival the minstrel confessed, readily enough, though with seeming reluctance, that he had no particular objective point in his journeying; that he but travelled for adventure, for love of his lady, and that it was his mind to linger around St. Nazaire or the coast till spring should give an opening

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into Normandy. Madame Eleanore would not hear of it that he should seek lodgings in St. Nazaire. There was strong tradition of hospitality in Le Crépuscule,—ordinarily a lonely place enough; and its châtelaine eagerly besought the Flaming-heart to lodge with her till spring—and longer if he would. And after that she put him, forsooth, into the Bishop's chamber on the ground-floor, gave Yvain an adjoining closet, and would take no refusal that he go hawking in the early afternoon with all the young squires of the Castle.

Bertrand took to his life at the Twilight Castle with a grace, an ease, and, withal, a tact that won him every heart within the first three days of his residence there. He was a man of the broad world, such an one as these simple Breton folk had not known before; for Seigneur Gerault did not travel like this fellow, and had none of his manner for setting forth tales. The young squires, the men-at-arms, the henchmen, the very cooks and scullions, listened open-mouthed and open-eyed at the stories he told of adventure and love, of distant countries, of kings and courts and mighty wars. Besides this, he could

manage a horse or a sword like any warrior knight ; he was deep learned in falconry ; he could track a hare or a fox through the most impossible furze ; and he could read like a monk and write like a scribe. As for his accomplishments with the other sex, they were too many to mention. Before evening of the second day every woman in the Castle from Madame Eleanore down, save, for some mysterious reason, Alixe, was at his feet, confessing her utter subjection. His soft Southern speech, the exquisite *Langue d'Oc*, used in Brittany as French was used in England ; his clean, dark, fine-featured face ; his glowing eyes ; his love-laden manner, that ever dared and never presumed ; finally, what, in all ages, has seemed to prove most attractive to women in men, a suggestion of past libertinism,—all these things combined to make him utterly irresistible to the feminine heart.

Such a life of never-ending adulation, of universal admiration, was a paradise to the troubadour, in whom inordinate vanity was the strongest and most carefully concealed characteristic. So long as he should be the

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centre of interest, he was never bored. But when he was not the central object, there were just two people in all the Castle that did not bore him unendurably. One of these was Madame Eleanore, in liking whom he betrayed exceptional taste; the other was Alixe, who had piqued him into attention. His admiration for madame was not wholly unnatural; for Bertrand Flammecœur, love-child as he was, and filled with unholy passions, was, nevertheless, as his singing showed, a man of refinement and gentle blood. His feeling for Alixe was keen, because it was unsatisfactory. She was at no pains to conceal her dislike for him, and it was her greatest pleasure to whip a pretty speech of his to rags with irony. He plied her with every art he knew, tried every mood upon her, and to Alixe's glory be it said, she never betrayed, by look or word, that she had anything for him more than, at best, contemptuous indifference. And after a week of effort the minstrel was obliged to confess to himself that never before, in all his adventures, had he met with so complete a rebuff from any woman.

He did not, even then, entirely relax his efforts. One morning, ten days after his arrival, he was passing the chapel, a small octagonal room opening off the great hall just beside the stairs, when he perceived Alixe within. She was alone ; and as he turned into the doorway she was just rising from her knees. Unconscious of his presence, she remained standing before the altar looking upon the crucifix, her hands fervently clasped before her. After watching her for a moment in silence, Flammeccœur began to move noiselessly across the little room, and was at her very shoulder before he said softly,—

“A fair good morn to thee, my demoiselle.”

Alixé wheeled about. “A prayerful one to thee, Sir Minstrel!” she said sharply, and would have left him but that, smiling, he held her back.

“Nay, ma mie, nay, be pleased to remain for a moment’s love-look.” Alixe merely shrugged at his teasing mockery, whereupon he became serious. “Listen, mademoiselle, and explain this matter to me. Is all this Castle under a vow of unceasing prayer? Piety beseems a damsel well enow ; yet never

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have I seen a household so devout. Madame Châtelaine repeats her prayers five times a day; and the step before the altar here is ever weighted by some ardent maid or squire. Ohé! Love in the south; prayer in the north. Rose of Langue d'Oc, — snows of Langue d'Oïl. Tell me, Dame Alixe, which likes thy heart the most, customs of my land or of thine?"

"This is all the land I know. And as for thee — well, if thou'rt a true man of the south, methinks I would remain here," she retorted discourteously, giving him eye for eye.

"I do not my country so much despite to say its men are all like me," returned the Flame-hearted, smoothly, in an inward rage. "Yet I could tell thee tales of thy cold Normandy that are not all of ice. Methinks this cheerless Breton coast is the mother of melancholy; for shine the sun never so brightly, it cannot melt the soul that hath been frozen under its past winter's sky. But, Demoiselle Alixe," — Flammeceur dropped his anger, and took on a sudden tone of exceeding interest, — "Demoiselle Alixe, I hold in my heart a great curiosity concerning thee. I see

thee here living as a daughter of the house ; yet art thou called Rieuse. Now, wast thou born in Crépuscule ? ”

Alixé regarded him with half-closed eyes. Never had she resented anything in him half so much as this question. Yet she replied to him in a tone as smooth as his own : “ Yea, truly I am of Le Crépuscule, by heart and love. But I am not of the Twilight blood. I was born on the Castle lands. I am the foster-sister of the Demoiselle Laure.”

“ Laure ? ”

“ Sooth, hast thou not heard of Laure, the daughter of madame ? ”

“ Nay. Is she dead, this maid ? ”

“ She is a nun.”

“ Ah ! ’T is the same.”

“ Not for us here. Thou must know she is but newly consecrated ; and she is to be permitted to come home, here, to the Castle, once in a fortnight, to see madame her mother. On the morrow she will come for the first time since her novitiate began, nine months ago.”

“ Sang Dieu ! Now know I why the Castle breathes with prayer. Madame would make all things holy enough to receive her. She

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cannot be old, this Laure, sith she is thy foster-sister?"

"I am older than she. Also, an I remain longer from the tapestry, I shall be caused to make you do half my daily task as a punishment for keeping me tardy. Give ye God-den, fair sir, and pleasant prayers!" And with a flutter and an unholy laugh, Alixe had whirled past him and was gone out of the chapel.

Flammecœur looked after her, but for the first time felt no inclination for pursuit. Perhaps this was because, for the first time, Alixe had given him something besides herself to think about. This daughter of Madame Eleanore and her peculiar vocation interested him extremely. It was quite surprising to find how interested one could become in little matters, after a few days in *Le Crépuscule*. So Flammecœur presently marched off to the armory in search of Yvain, and, finding him, he questioned the little squire minutely as to the gossip of the keep concerning the *Demoiselle Laure*. Was she misshapen? This was the only excuse for entering a nunnery that occurred to the Flame-hearted.

Yvain had not heard that she was deformed. Was she crossed in love? Mayhap; but Yvain had not heard it. Flammeccœur shrugged his shoulders. The enigma was not solved. It mattered little enough, anyway. Alixe had jilted him again. Heigho! He ordered his horse, and went to seek a falcon. While in the falcon-house he remembered that this nun was coming to the Castle on the morrow, and he decided that he would have a sight of her when she arrived.

Not unnaturally Bertrand Flammeccœur had taken on the state of mind of the whole Castle. Mademoiselle was coming home on the morrow. Every one knew it, for a message had arrived on the previous day from Monseigneur the Bishop of St. Nazaire, and Le Crépuscule was in a state of unwonted excitement. The word came to madame as less of a surprise than as an overwhelming relief, and a joy that had some bitterness in it. It had rested with St. Nazaire whether her child should come home to see her twice in the month! Ah, well, she was coming; she would lie in her mother's arms; the Castle would echo again to the music of her voice! Thus through

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the whole day madame sat dreaming of the morrow, nor noticed the tardy arrival of Alixe in the spinning-room, nor how, all morning, Isabelle and Viviane whispered and smiled and idled over their tasks.

Now, if Madame Eleanore's heart and brain were full to overflowing with the dreams of Laure, how feverish with longing came the thought of home, home though for one little hour, to the prisoner herself! On the night before her going, as, indeed, on many nights of late, Laure could not sleep. Her eyes stared wide open into the night, while her mind traced outlines of *Le Crépuscule* in the soft darkness. Ah! the dearly loved halls and their blessed company, all that she had not seen for nearly nine months, and on the morrow should see again! Her brain burned with impatience. She tossed and tumbled on her hard and narrow bed. Finally, long ere the hour for matins, she rose and went to sit at the window of her cell, looking out upon the clear and frosty winter's night. How the hours passed till prime she scarcely knew. But at a quarter to five, when matins were over, she went down into the church for first service,

wearing short riding-shoes under her white robe, with her hair bound tight beneath her coif and veil, for galloping. During the simple prayer-service, she got twenty penitential Aves for inattention, and read added reproof in the eyes of Mère Piteuse. At length, however, it came to be the hour for the breaking of the fast, and Laure found opportunity to speak to the Sœur Eloise, who was to follow her as attendant and protectress on the road to Crépuscule. Stupid, stolid, faithful, low of birth and therefore much in awe of Laure, was this little nun; and had the Mother Prioress been worldly wise, it had not been she that followed Laure into the world this bright and bitter January morning.

At a quarter to eight o'clock the two young women mounted their palfreys at the convent gate, and were off into the snow-filled forest, while behind them echoed gentle admonitions to unceasing prayer. Feeling a saddle under her once again, and a strong white horse bearing her along over a well-beaten road, Laure drew a breath that seemed to have no end. And as her lungs filled with God's free air, she pressed one hand to her throat to ease the

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terrible ache of rising tears. How long it was since she had felt free to move her limbs! How long since she had traversed this shaded road! Eloise did not trouble her. The lay sister was too occupied in clinging to the mane of her horse to venture speech; and she looked at her high-born companion with mingled awe and admiration as she saw her urge her beast into a trot. The convent animal had an easy gait, and appeared to possess possibilities in the way of speed. Laure touched him a little with her spur. The creature responded well. A moment later Eloise turned pale with fright to see her lady strike the spur home in earnest, and go flying wildly down the road till she was presently lost among the thick snow-laden trees.

Laure was happy now. She found herself not much encumbered with her dress, which had been "modified" in obedience to the law for conduct outside the convent. Her gown and mantle were of the usual cut, and she was girdled by her rosary; but her head was covered with a close-fitting black hood from which fell a short white veil, two edges of which were pinned beneath her chin, giving her, though she did not know it, a delightfully softened

expression. After she had left Eloise behind, she continued to increase the speed of her animal till she had all but lost control of him. Fifteen minutes later she was out of the forest and running along a heavily packed road, bordered on either side with a thin line of trees, beyond which stretched broad fields and moorlands, among which, somewhere, the priory estate ended and that of Le Crépuscule began. Eloise was now a mile behind ; but Laure had no thought for her. Her breath was coming short no less with emotion than with the exercise ; for the image of her mother was before her eyes. She let her mind search where it would, through sweet and yearning depths ; and her heart was filled with thanksgiving for this hour of freedom. She was nearing that place where the Rennes highway joined that of St. Nazaire, both of them uniting at the Castle road, which led to the Chateau by a long and winding ascent. Presently the Chateau became visible ; and Laure, looking on it with all her soul in her eyes, took no heed of the slow-moving horseman ahead of her, on whom she was rapidly gaining. Indeed, neither was aware of the presence of the other,

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till Laure's horse, scenting company, made a short dash of a hundred yards, and then came into a sudden walk beside the animal bestrode by Bertrand Flammeccœur of Provence. The suddenness of the horse's stop caused Laure to jerk heavily forward. Flammeccœur leaned over and caught her bridle. At that moment their eyes met.

A flush of vivid pink overspread Laure's lily face. She shrank quickly away from the look in Flammeccœur's eyes. Then her hand went up to her dishevelled hair; and she tried confusedly to straighten it back.

"Take not such pains, reverend lady. By the glory of the saints, thou couldst not make thyself as lovely as God's world hath made thee! — Prithee, heed me not!"

Laure gave a little gasp at the man's daring; yet such was Flammeccœur's manner that she did not find herself offended. Presently she had the impulse to give him a sideways glance; and then, all untutored as she was, she read the lively admiration that was written in his face. After that her hands came down from her head, and she took up her bridle again, by the act causing him to relinquish it. "The Sœur

Eloise is behind me. I fear that I did much outdistance her," she said, with a demureness through which a smile was very near to breaking.

Flammecœur looked at her with a peculiar pleasure, a pleasure that he had not often experienced. His immediate impulse was to put a still greater distance between them and Eloise; but prudence came happily to his aid. "Let us stop here till thine attendant comes, while thy horse breathes," he said, bringing his animal to a gentle halt.

Laure acquiesced at once, and did not analyze her little momentary qualm as one of disappointment. Nevertheless, her face grew white again, and she said not a word through the ten minutes they had to wait till Eloise came riding heavily out of the wood. The other nun looked infinitely startled at the sight of Flammecœur, and was muttering a prayer while she stared from Laure to the trouvère. As soon, however, as she came, the others reined their horses about, and immediately, in the most remarkable silence that the Provençal had ever experienced, proceeded up the hill and into the Castle courtyard.

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In this wise they reached the Chateau, and Laure came to her own again. She found herself surrounded by every one and everything that she had so unspeakably yearned for ; and — they made little impression on her. She walked among them like one in a dream, striving in vain to free her mind from its encompassing mists. When she was alone with her mother, in Eleanore's familiar and beloved room, Laure felt in herself an inexplicable insincerity. She clung to madame, and wept, and kissed her, and expressed in eager, disjointed phrases the great joy she felt in being at home again ; and all the while she scarce knew what she said, or wherefore she said it. And in the end she gave such an impression of hysteria that her mother became seriously distressed.

At dinner Laure's manner changed. She was quiet and silent, and kept her eyes fixed continually on her plate. Her cheeks were burning and she was in a tumult of inward emotion that displayed itself in the most unwonted stupidity. Her mother never dreamed the reason for her mood. Curiously enough, Alixe read Laure better, though she scarcely dared admit to herself that which she saw.

No look of Flammecœur's, nor quick flush of the young nun's face escaped her eyes, yet neither then nor ever after did Alixe confess to any one what she read; for her own heart was too much wrought upon for speech.

Dinner ended, and with that end came the hour for Laure's return to the convent. The girl realized this with a chill at her heart, but accepted the inevitable resignedly. It was with a sense of desolation that she followed Eloise out of the Castle to the courtyard where their horses were waiting. Her parting with her mother was filled with grief of the sincerest kind. She wept and clung to Madame Eleanore, gasping out convulsive promises to return as soon as the rule permitted. She said good-bye to Alixe as tenderly as to her mother, for the two maidens were fast friends; she kissed all the demoiselles, was kissed by the young squires-at-arms; and it was a sudden relief to her, in this rush of home-feeling, that Flammecœur was nowhere to be seen, he and Yvain having disappeared immediately after dinner.

Much to the satisfaction of Eloise, who endured a good deal of discomfort when she was

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in high places, Laure finally mounted her palfrey, and the two of them started away, waving good-byes all across the courtyard and drawbridge, and indeed until Eleanore, leaning heavily on Alixe's arm, turned to re-enter the Castle.

The nuns began their descent of the long hill at a slow, jogging trot; and presently Eloise remarked comfortably, —

“Reverend Mother enjoined us to repeat the hours as we ride. But so didst thou gallop on the way hither, Sister Angelique, and so out of breath was I with trotting after, that I said no more than the first part of one Ave. Therefore let us return at a more seemly pace, that we may rightly tell our beads,” and the stolid sister settled her horse into a slower walk, and sighed comprehensively as she thought of the dinner she had eaten and the sweetmeats that were hidden in her tunic.

Laure did not answer her. She fingered her rosary dutifully, and her lips mechanically repeated the prayers. But her thoughts were no more on what she said than they were upon food. Her face was drawn and whiter even than its wont, and she sat her horse with a

weary air. She was making no struggle against the inevitable. In her soul she knew that she must be strong enough to endure her lot; but she could make no pretence to herself that that lot was pleasant.

The two were a long time in their descent of the hill, and it was mid-afternoon when they reached the bend in the road that hid the Chateau from sight. Laure was not looking ahead; rather, when she looked, her eyes noticed nothing. But suddenly Eloise started from her prayers and uttered an exclamation: "Saints of God! There is that man again!"

A quick, cold tremor passed over Laure, and she trembled violently. There in the road, fifty yards away, both of them on horseback, were Flammeccœur and his page.

Eloise began a series of weak and rapid expostulations. Laure sat like a statue in her saddle. Nothing was done till the two young women came abreast of the troubadour and his boy. Then, with a rapid and adroit movement, young Yvain wheeled his horse between Laure and Eloise, and presently fell back with Eloise's animal beside him, while Bertrand Flammeccœur drew up beside Laure. The

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man was white with nervousness, and he bent toward her and said in a low voice: "Sister of angels, grant me pardon for this act!"

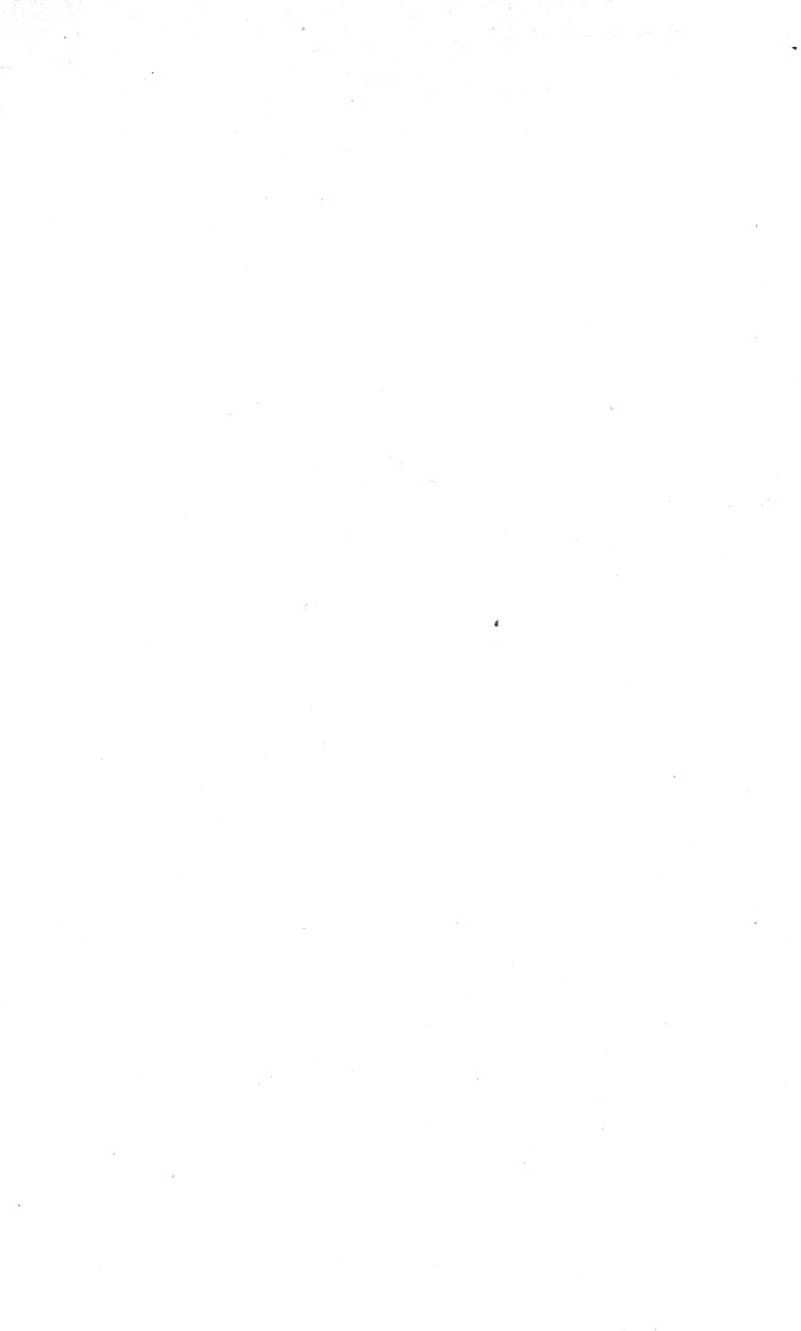
Laure had gone all aflame. Her heart was beating tremulously and her dry throat contracted so that she could not speak. But looking, for one fleeting instant, into his face, she smiled.

Flammecœur could have laughed for joy, for he saw that his cause was won. And the ease of this conquest did not make him contemptuous of it; for however little he understood it, there was that in this childlike nun that made him hold his breath with reverence before her. The hour that followed their second meeting was almost as new to him as to her, in the stretch of emotions. They spoke very little. From behind them came the continual, droll chatter of Yvain and the answering giggles of Eloise. But Laure could not have laughed, and the trouvère knew it. As they entered the forest, however, at no great distance from the priory, he leaned far over and laid one of his gloved hands upon the tunic that covered her knee.

"Let me have some gage, — some token



*THE whole Castle had assembled to say
Godspeed to their departing lord.—Page 25*



of thee," he said in a hoarse and unsteady tone.

"I cannot! Oh, I cannot!"

He did not urge, but resignedly drew his hand away; and as Laure's body made the little, involuntary movement of following him, he contained his joy with an effort.

Now the white priory was visible from afar, among the leafless trees; and so Laure, reining in her horse, turned to her companion: "Thou must leave us at once," she whispered, trembling.

He bent his head, and drew his horse to a standstill. At the same time Yvain and Eloise rode up, having just pledged themselves to eternal devotion. After a moment's hesitation, Flammeccœur leaned again toward Laure, asking, this time fearfully, —

"Wilt thou tell me, lady, in what part of the convent is thy cell?"

She looked at him, wondering, but answered what he wanted, and then waited, in silence, praying that he would ask another question. He sat, however, with his head bent over so that she could not see his face, and he said nothing more. Laure sighed, looked up into

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the wintry sky, looked down to the snow-covered earth, felt the pall of her frozen life closing around her once again, and then got a sudden, blind determination that that life should not smother the little, creeping flame that had to-day been lighted in her heart. Looking sidewise at Flammecœur, who sat bowed upon his horse, she whispered, —

“ Shall we — see — each other yet again ? ”

“ By all the saints — and God — we shall !
We shall ! ”

“ Alas, Angelique, we are late for vespers !
Haste ! ” cried Eloise, in the same moment.

Laure sent the spur into her palfrey, which leaped forward like the stone from a sling. Eloise followed after her at a terrifying pace, and the troubadour and his page stood and watched them till they were lost among the trees. The two reached the priory gate almost together ; and before they were admitted, Eloise, her face flushed and her eyes shining, whispered imploringly to Laure : “ Confess it not ! Confess it not ! Else shall we never go again ! ”

To this plea Laure had no time to make reply ; but the other, seeing her manner, had,

somehow, no fear that she would betray herself, and with her the delicious love-prattlings of Yvain.

They found vespers just at an end, and were reproved for their tardy return. Eloise retreated to her cell at once, to repeat her penitential Aves of the morning, and Laure retired ostensibly for the same purpose.

Once alone in her cell, the young girl took off her riding-garments, — the unusual cap and veil, boots, gloves, and spur, — and put them carefully away in her oaken chest. Afterwards she straightened her bliaut and her hair, set her image of the Virgin straight upon its shelf, and moved the *priedieu* a little more accurately between the door and her bed. Then, standing up, she looked about her. There was nothing more to do. She was alone with her heart, and she could no longer escape from thinking. So she sat down on the bed, folded her hands upon her knees, and in this wise twisted out the meaning of her day, till she found in her secret soul that the unspeakable, the unholy, the most glorious, had come to her, to fill the great void of her empty life.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PASSION



IN the evening of the day of that momentous visit, after compline was over, and she was in her bed in her cell, Laure yielded herself up to sleep only after a rebellious struggle; she wished intensely to lie awake with her wonderful thoughts. Sleep prevailed, however, and was sound and dreamless; for she was physically tired out.

At two in the morning came the first boom of the church bell pulled by the sleep-laden sexton,—the beginning of the call to matins. The night was very black; and only after two or three minutes did Laure struggle up from her bed, trembling with that dead, numb feeling that results from being roused too suddenly from heavy unconsciousness. Mechani-

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cally the young girl felt about for her lantern and opened the door into the dimly lit corridor. There were half a dozen nuns and novices grouped about the stone lamp which burned all night on the wall, and from which the sisters were accustomed to light their cressets for matins. Laure waited her turn in a dazed manner, and when she had obtained the light, went back to her cell, left the door unclosed according to rule, and, placing the lantern on the small table, knelt at her priedieu.

So far her every move had been mechanical. Her brain was not yet awake. But, with the first words of the *Agnus Dei*, the full memory of yesterday suddenly flashed upon her. She had been at home, and had found there *Flammecœur!*—*Flammecœur!* Her own heart flamed up, and the prayer died away from it. Her lips moved on, and the murmur of her voice continued to swell the low chorus that spread through the whole priory. But Laure was not speaking those words. Her whole mind and heart had turned irrevocably to another subject,—to another god, the little, rosy-winged boy that finds his way into the sternest places, and lights them with his magic

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presence till they are changed for their inhabitants beyond recognition. Strictly speaking, Laure was not thinking of the *trouvère*. Her thoughts refused to review him in the light of her knowledge of him. She would not think of his personality, — his face, eyes, form, or manner. Her heart shrank from anything so bold. She refused to question herself. Yet her mind was full of him, and the other subject in her thoughts was this: that in eleven days more, were God pitying to her, she should, perhaps — ever perhaps — see him again.

When matins and lauds were over, the sisters returned to bed till the hour for dressing, a quarter to five. Laure was accustomed to sleep soundly through this period. But to-day she refused to close her eyes. Nay, it was ecstasy to her to lie dreaming of many old, vague things that had scarce any connection with her new heart, and yet would have had no place at all with her had they not carried as an undercurrent the image of that same new god.

All day Laure went about with a song in her soul. Why she should have been glad, who can say? What possible hope for happi-

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ness there was for her, what idea of any finale save one of grief, resignation, or despair, she never thought to ask herself. She let her new happiness take possession of her without stopping to analyze it. And it was as well that she did no analyzing. For a logical process would inevitably have brought her to the beginning of these things, to the moment, the ineffable moment, when the hand of Flamme-cœur had first rested on her own.

This first morning passed away. Dinner was eaten, and recreation time came. Now Eloise persistently sought Laure's company; and Laure, with equal persistence and quite remarkable adroitness, avoided her. The young nun knew, from the face of Eloise, that there were a thousand silly thoughts ready to come out of her; and Laure could not bear to have her own delicate, rainbow dreams so crudely disturbed. And there was something more about the presence of Eloise that disturbed the daughter of *Le Crépuscule*; this was the understanding between them that they should not confess the real reason for their tardy arrival on the previous day. Laure had made up her mind, tacitly, to

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confess nothing — yet. But she did not like to be reminded of the fact.

That night Laure successfully resisted the dictates of sleep, with the result that, all next day, she felt dull and weak. When dinner and sext were over, and recreation came, she obtained ready permission to retire to her cell instead of going to the garden or the court or the library with the other nuns. Once alone and safe from the attacks of Eloise, who was becoming importunate, she lay down on her bed and sank, almost at once, to rest. While she slept, the sun came out upon the outer world, and poured its beams over the chill valley beyond the priory. The gray, lowering clouds were broken up. The heavens shone blue, and the ice-crust shimmered with myriad, sparkling diamonds. No sunlight could enter the cell of sleep; for it was afternoon, and the single little window looked toward the east. But after nearly an hour of shining stillness, there came a sound from the frozen vale that was more beautiful than sunlight. It reached Laure's ears, and woke her. She rose up, hearkening incredulously for a moment, and

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then, with a smothered cry of delight, threw herself forward again on the bed, and laughed and moaned together into the cold sheets.

From below, just outside her window, rose a voice, a tenor voice, high and clear and mellow, singing a chanson of the south to the accompaniment of a six-stringed lute. After a few seconds Laure ventured to raise her head and listen. With a thrill of ecstasy she caught the words, —

*“ Ele ot plain le visage, si fu encolorez ;
Les iex vairs et rians, lonc et traités le nez ;
La bouche vermeillète, le menton forcelé ;
Le col plain et blanc plus que n'est flor de pré.”*

At this point in the familiar song, sung with a fervor she had never dreamed of, Laure rose involuntarily from the bed, and, redder than any flower, stole to the window. Timidly, her heart beating so that she was like to choke, she looked out into the snowy clearing. Just beneath her, in the shadow of the wall, so close that a whisper from him might easily have been heard, stood Flammeccœur.

He was scanning closely the row of cell windows above him, hoping against hope for

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a sight of Laure's face. Ignorant as he was of convent hours, he knew that he had but the barest chance of making her hear; and that there was less than this chance of seeing her. Thus when Laure's face, framed in its soft white veil, looked out to him, Flamme-cœur experienced a rush of emotion that was overpowering. She inspired him with a reverence that he had not known he could feel for any woman. Her face was so glorified in his eyes that she looked like an image of the Holy Virgin. Breaking off in the middle of the song, he fell upon his knees there in the snow, uttering incoherent and indistinguishable phrases of adoration.

Flammecœur was theatrical enough; also he was hard, utterly unscrupulous, and a scoffer at holy things. His only idol was his love for beauty. This was his religion, and he had worshipped it consistently from boyhood. Now he had found its almost perfect embodiment in this girl, in whom innocence, purity, youth, and beauty were inextricably mingled. And Flammecœur strove to adjust his rather callous spirit to hers, feeling that he would sooner breathe his last

than shock her delicacy — till he had attained his end.

Now, in the dying sunlight, the two talked together; and in the light of his new reverence the young nun lost a little of her timidity and made open confession in her looks, though never in her words, of her delight in his presence.

“Tell me, O Maiden of Angels,” he said, addressing her in a term that at once brought them both a sense of familiarity and of pleasure, “tell me, is this thy regular hour of solitude? Could I — might I hope — to see thee often here — hold speech with thee — without endangering thy devotions?”

“Nay, verily!” whispered Laure, hastily. “Oh, thou must not come! Nay, I am supposed to be with the other sisters at this hour of recreation. Only to-day was I permitted —”

“And didst thou think of me? Hopedst thou I would come? Didst think —”

“Monsieur!” Laure’s tone was reproachful and embarrassed.

“Forgive me! Though verily I know not how I have offended thee!”

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Laure was about to utter her reproach when suddenly, around the corner of the wall, appeared the head of Flammeccœur's horse. All at once, at this apparition, the old spirit of freedom and the old love of liberty rushed over her. "Ah, would that I might leap down there into the snow, and mount with thee thy steed, and ride, and ride, and ride back to my home in Le Crépuscule!" she cried out, utterly forgetful of herself and of her position.

Instantly Flammeccœur seized her mood. "By all the saints, come on!" he cried. "I will catch thee in mine arms; and we will ride! We will ride and ride — not back —"

"Alas! Now Heaven forgive me! What have I said? Farewell, monsieur! Indeed, farewell!"

And ere Flammeccœur could grasp her sudden revulsion of feeling, she was gone; the window above him was empty. He stayed where he was for some moments, meditating on what plea would be successful. Finally, deciding silence the surer part, he remounted his horse and turned slowly to the west, through the chill evening, doing battle with himself. He found that he was unable to cope with the

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flame that this pretty nun had kindled in his brain. His anger rose against her, to be once more overtopped by passion. And had he not been so occupied in trying to regain sufficient self-control to make some safe plan of action, he might have known himself for the knave he surely was.

In the priory three days went prayerfully by ; and at the end of that time Laure found herself sick with misery. Flammeccœur had laid hold of her heart, and her struggles against the thought of him began to grow stronger ; for she longed to escape from her present state of madness. Incredible as it may seem, she never had, in connection with him, one single tainted thought. Laure was a peculiarly innocent girl, — innocent even of any unshaped desire or longing. The force of her nature had always found relief in physical activity. In her home life all things had been clean and free before her. And in the convent the teaching that emotion was sin had been accepted by her without thought. Nevertheless, in her, all unwaked, there lay a broad, passionate nature that needed but a quickening touch to throw her into such depths as, were she taken un-

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awares, would eventually drag her to her doom. Her ignorance was pitiable; and even now she had entered alone upon a dark stretch of road, the end of which she did not herself know, and which none could prophesy to her.

Three days of unhappiness, of battle with herself, and of longing for a sight of Flamme-cœur, and then — he came. Again it was the recreation hour, and Laure was in the garden, walking in the cold with one or two of the sisters. Her thoughts had strayed from the general chatter, and her eyes, like her mind, looked afar off. Her companions, rather accustomed to Angelique's vagaries, paid little attention to her, and she pursued her reverie uninterrupted. Suddenly, from out of the snowy stillness, a sound reached her ears. For an instant her heart ceased to beat; and she halted in her walk. Yes, Flamme-cœur was singing, somewhere near. It was the same chanson, and it came from the other side of the priory. He must be where he had been before. She looked at the faces of the nuns beside her. Did they not also hear? How dull, how intensely dull they were! She went on for a few steps undecidedly. Then she halted.

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“I had forgot,” she said quietly. “I must to my cell. I have five Aves to repeat for inattention at the reading of St. Elizabeth this morning.”

“Methought they were to be said in chapter,” observed one of her companions, indifferently.

“Nay; Reverend Mother gave permission,—in my cell,” answered Laure, rather weakly; for she saw that she should get into difficulty if any one mentioned this matter again. However, Flammeccœur’s voice was singing still and, flinging care to the winds, she made a hasty escape.

Fifteen minutes later she was in the church, kneeling at the shrine of St. Joseph. She said twenty Aves there before she rose, yet got no comfort from them. For twenty Aves is small salve to the conscience for the first guilty deceit of one’s life.

That evening was not wholly a pleasant one; yet Laure underwent fierce gusts of happiness. She had seen him again; she had held speech with him, and had smiled when he looked at her. She felt his looks like caresses, and was half ashamed and half enamoured of them.

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Her night was filled with a tumult of dreams ; and when day dawned again she was hot with the fever of unrest.

Days went by, and then weeks, and finally two months, and March was on the world. Hints of spring were borne down the breeze. The deeply frozen earth began slowly, slowly to throw off its weight of ice, and to open its breast to the warm touches of the sun. The black, bare branches of the forest trees waved about uncannily, like gaunt arms, beckoning to the distant summer. And in all this time the situation of the little nun of Crépuscule had not changed. The troubadour still lingered at the Chateau, a welcome guest. And still he haunted the priory, unknown to any one save her whom he continually sought. As yet he had done nothing, said not one word that betrayed his intentions. He had waited patiently till the time should be ripe ; and now that time approached. Laure had endured a life of secret torture, but had not succeeded in throwing off the shackles she had voluntarily put on. Nay, she confessed now to herself that, without his occasional coming, she could not have lived. She chafed at their restricted

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intercourse. She longed to meet him where she could put her hands into his, where she could listen to the sound of his voice without the terror of discovery. All this Flammeccœur had read in her, but still he waited till of her own accord she should break her bonds.

There came a day in March when the two, Laure and Flammeccœur, with Eloise and her now very *bel ami*, Yvain, were riding from Crépuscule to the priory. As they went, the spring sun sent its beams aslant across the road; and birds, newly arrived from the far south, were site-hunting among the black trees. The air was filled with the chilly sweetness that made one dizzy with dreams of coming summer; and both Laure and the trouvère grew slowly intoxicated as they rode side by side, so close that his knee touched her palfrey's flank. Behind them, Yvain and Eloise were still discussing their love-notions. The afternoon was misty with approaching sunset. In the radiant golden light, Laure's heart grew big with unshed tears of life; and before the sobs came, Flammeccœur, leaning far toward her, whispered thickly,—

“Thou must come to me alone! I must

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have thee alone. I must know thy lips. 'Fore God, refuse me not, thou greatly beloved ! ”

Laure drew a long, shivering breath and looked slowly into his face. Her eyes rested full upon his, and she did not speak, but he read her reply.

“ Where shall I come to-night ? ” he asked.

“ To-night ! ”

“ Assuredly. To-night. Dieu ! Thinkest thou that I can stand aloof from thee forever ? Thinkest thou my blood is water in my veins ? To-night ! ”

Laure mused a little, her eyes looking afar off, as if she dreamed. She brought them back to him with a start. “ To-night — by starlight — in the convent garden. Canst thou climb the wall ? ”

“ Ah ! thou shalt see ! ”

Laure's heart palpitated with the look he gave her, and she sat silent under it, while, bit by bit, all her training, all her year of precepts, all herself, her womanhood, her truth, her steadfastness to righteousness, slipped away from her under the spell of this most powerful of all emotions. And presently she turned to him again with such an expression of exalta-

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tion in her poor face, that his heart warmed to her with a tenderer feeling.

“At what hour?” he whispered.

“One hour after the last tolling of the bell at compline after confession.”

“Confession!” the word slipped from him before he thought. He saw Laure turn first scarlet and then very white; and her lips trembled.

“Ah, Laure, most beloved, heed it not! If there be any sin in loving as we love, lay it all on me. For on my soul, I would leave heaven itself gladly behind for thee! And since God created thee as lovely as thou art, wert thou not made to be beloved? Look, Laure! see the gray bird there among the trees! Behold, it is the bird of the Saint Esprit! It is an omen. It is our heavenly sign; therefore be not afraid.”

And as Laure promised him, so she did. She understood so well how the Flaming-heart wanted to be alone with her: did she not also long for solitude with him? And if they were alone for one hour, God was above. He saw and He knew all things. Why, then, should she be afraid?

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Therefore Laure went to her cell that night with her soul unshriven, and a heavy weight upon it of mingled joy and pain. Lying fully dressed upon her bed, she heard the great bell boom out the close of another day of praise to God. And when the last vibration had died down the wind, and the sexton had wended her pious way to bed, Laure rose, and prepared herself to go out into the garden. All that she had to do was to wrap herself in her mantle and to cover her head with a hood and veil. But first, following an instinct of dormant conscience, she unwound the rosary from her waist and hung it on the rail of the priedieu, before which she had not prayed to-night. Then she sat down upon her bed and waited, — waited through centuries, through ages, till it seemed to her that dawn must be about to break. But she felt that should she reach the garden before the coming of Flammeccœur, her heart would fail indeed. During this time she refused to allow herself to think, though she was very cold and continued to tremble. Finally, when her nerves would stay her no longer, she rose and left her cell. The convent was open before her. The nuns were all asleep. Her sandalled

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feet made no noise upon the stones, and she passed in safety through corridors and rooms till she reached the library, from which there was an open exit to the garden.

In the doorway she paused and looked out upon the pale moonlit scene. Her heart was beating quite steadily now, and she was able to consider almost with calmness the possibility that she was early. The light from the half-moon fell upon her where she stood, and suddenly she beheld a dark-cloaked figure run out of the shrubbery by the northwestern wall and come hurrying toward her. At the same moment she herself started forward, half fearfully. A moment later she was caught in Flammeccœur's arms, and a rain of kisses beat down upon her face.

Gasping, crimson, horrified, she tore herself away from the embrace with the strength of one outraged.

"Stop! In God's name, stop! Wouldst do me dishonor?" she cried out, in an anger that bordered upon tears.

"Dishonor! Mon Dieu! wherefore, prithee, camest thou into this garden, then? Was it to stand here in this doorway and per-

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mit me to scream my devotion at thee from yonder wall?"

In her nervousness Laure suddenly laughed. But she was forced back to gravity, as he went on with a sudden rush of passion, —

"Laure, Laure, is it thy intent to drive me mad? Faith, what man would forbear as I have forborne with thee? Thinkest thou any one would wait for weeks, nay, months, as I have waited, and feel thee at last free and in his arms, to be instantly thrust away again? Nay, by my soul! Thou art here, and thou art mine, and I have much to ask of thee. Christ! Thine eyes! Thy hair! Laure, I shall bear thee away from this prison-house. I will have thee for all mine own. Thou must leave thy cell by night, and come to me here. Outside the wall Yvain will wait with horses; and we will ride away — ride like hounds — out of this land of tears, southward, into the country of freedom and roses and love! There we shall dwell together, thou and I — thou and I — Laure, Laure, my sweet! And who in all God's earth before hath known such joy as we shall know! Answer me, Laure, answer me! Say thou'lt come!"

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Once again he took her in his arms, but more calmly now, the force of his passion having spent itself in words but half articulate. And now he perceived how she was all trembling and afraid; and so he soothed her with gentle phrases and tender caresses, for indeed Flammecœur loved this maid as truly as it was in him to love at all. And it seemed to him a joy to have the protecting of her.

“Speak to me, answer me, greatly beloved,” he insisted, drawing her face up to his.

Laure clung to him and wept, and did not speak. All that followed was but a confusion of kisses, of pleadings, of tears and restraints, to both of them; and presently Laure was struggling from his arms and crying to him that it was near matins, and she must go. Once again, and finally, Flammecœur demanded a reply to his plea. There was hesitation, doubting, evident desire, and very evident fear. Then, staking everything, he urged her thus, —

“Listen, Laure. I would not have thee decide all things now in thy mind. In one week I will be here, as to-night, at the same

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hour, in this place ; and all things will be prepared for our flight. If thou come to me before the matins bell rings out, all will be well, and we shall go forth together into heaven. If thou come not,—why, I have tarried far too long in this Bretagne, and Yvain and I will go on together into the world, and thou shalt see me no more forever. Fair choice and honorable I give thee, for that I love thee better than myself. Now fare thee well, lady of my heart's delight. God in His sweet mercy give thee into my keeping !”

With a final kiss he put her from him and saw her go ; and then he threw himself over the wall, and set out on his return ride to the Castle by the sea.

Laure descended to prime next morning, trembling for fear of unknown possibilities. But no one in the church saw her muddy sandals ; and her skirts and mantle were not more soiled round the bottom than was customary with those nuns that took their recreation in the garden. By the time the breaking of the fast occurred, she was reassured, and felt herself safe from the consequences of her night. Then, and only then, did she turn her mind to

the choice that she must make during the ensuing sennight.

That week was one of terror by night and woe by day. Hourly she resolved to renounce forever all thoughts of the flesh, confess her sin, and remain true to the convent for life. For the first three days these renewals of faith made her strong and stronger. She wept and she prayed and she hoped for strength; and finally she began to believe that the Devil was beaten. And yet — and yet — she did not even now confess the story of her acquaintance with Flammeccœur. She said to herself that she would win this last fight alone; but she did not seek to find if there was self-deception in that excuse. No one but the girl Eloise had any idea that there existed such a person as the trouvère; and Eloise was unaware that Sœur Angelique had ever seen that gallant gentleman save when she and Yvain were present. Moreover, the stupid one was becoming alarmed lest the sudden devotional fervor of Demoiselle Angelique should lead to the cessation of those meetings for which her vague soul so impiously thirsted. The rest of the sisters perceived Laure's extra prayers and rigorous

fasting with admiration and approval, and put them down to one of those sudden rushes of fervor to which young nuns were peculiarly subject.

After three days of this devotional effort, the Devil widened his little wedge of temptation, and roused in her an overpowering desire to see her lover again. By now she had lost her shame at the first hot kiss ever laid upon her lips, and — alas, poor humanity ! — was longing secretly for more. So long, however, as *Flammecœur* was still in *Le Crépuscule*, she believed that she could endure everything. But she knew that after four days he would be there no more ; and if she let her chance go, it was the last she should ever have. Then her mind strayed to the after-picture of her life here in the nunnery ; and at the thought her heart grew numb and cold. Yet still she fought and prayed, trusting to no one her weight of temptation, keeping steadfastly to that self-deceptive determination to finish the battle alone.

The torturing week came slowly to an end. On the final night, after compline, she went to her cell feeling like a spirit condemned to eternal night. Once alone, face to face with her

soul, she sat down upon a chair, bent her head upon her breast, and thought. She did not extinguish her light, neither did she make preparations for bed. Unconsciously she set herself to wait through the hour following compline, as if its finish would bring the end of her trial. The minutes were passing smoothly by, and there was a great, unuttered cry of terror in her heart. What should she do? Nay, at the last minute, what *would* she do? Here her mind broke. She could think no more. Her brain was a vacuum. Presently her muscles began to twitch. Her flesh became cold and damp, and the hot saliva poured into her mouth. Would that hour never end?

It ended. By now Flamme-cœur was in the garden, three hundred feet away. Flamme-cœur was waiting for her. Horses were there, and garments for her, — other garments than these of sickening white wool. How long would the *trouvère* wait? Till matins, he had said. But if that were not true? If he should go before — if he were going *now*!

Laure started to her feet, halted, hesitated, then sank slowly to her knees. The first words of a prayer came from her lips; but in the mid-

dle of the phrase she was silent. Prayer was suddenly nothing to her. She had prayed so much ; she had prayed so long ! The beauty of appeals to the Most High was lost just now. She felt all the weight of her never-satisfied religion upon her, and she revolted at it. For the moment love itself seemed desirable only in so much as it would get her away from this place of her hypocrisy. A sudden thought of her mother came to her. For one moment — two — five — she kept her mind fixed. Then she sobbed. Flammecœur was below, calling to her with every fibre of his being. She knew that. She could see him waiting there, her cloak over his arm. With a low wail she stretched out her arms to the mental image. Afterwards, scarcely knowing what she did, she knelt down before the bright-painted picture of the Madonna on the wall of her cell, and kissed the stones of the floor below it.

Then she stood up, pressing her hands tightly to her throat to ease the pain there. She looked around her, and in that look saw everything in the little stone room that had for so long been her home. Then, removing from her head the coif, wimple, and veil, the

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symbols of her virginity, she extinguished her lantern, and walked, blindly and wearily, out of her cell. So she passed, without making any noise, through the convent, into the library, and out — out — out into the garden beyond.

Instantly Flammecœur was at her side. “Laure!” cried he, half laughing in his triumph. “Laure! Now we shall go!”

Over his arm he carried a voluminous black mantle and a close, dark hood. These he put upon her, getting small assistance in the matter, for Laure’s movements were wooden, her hands like ice.

“Now — canst climb the wall with me?” he asked, gazing at her in her transformation, and noting how pure and white her skin showed in its dark frame.

She gasped and bent her head. Thereupon he seized her in his arms and carried her to the wall. There she surpassed his hopes; for her old, tomboyish skill suddenly came back to her, and she scrambled up the rough stones more agilely than he. Once in the road outside the garden, Flammecœur gave a low whistle. Then, out of the shadow of the wood, on the north side of the road, came

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Yvain, riding one steed, and leading that of Flammeccœur, on which were both saddle and pillion. Flammeccœur leaped to his place, and, bending over, held out his hand to Laure.

“Thou comest freely,” he whispered.

Laure looked up into his eyes. “Freely,” she answered, surrendering her soul.

He laughed again, softly, as she climbed up behind him, by the help of his feet and his hands. And then, in another moment, they were off, into the moonlit night. And what that night concealed from Laure, what future of fierce joy, of terror, of misery, and of unutterable heartbreak, how should she know, poor girl, whose only guide was God Inscrutable, working His mysterious way alone, in heaven on high?

CHAPTER FIVE

SHADOWS



ON the day after Laure's flight, Madame Eleanore left the great dinner-table and went to her bedroom early in the afternoon. Once again, as a year ago, she was alone there, hovering over her priedieu. Only this day was not sunny, but cold and damp, and very gray. Eleanore was in her usual mood of lonely melancholy, but when Alixe tapped at the door she was admitted, and madame ceased her devotions and bade the girl come in and sit down to her embroidery frame beside the window. Latterly it had become a habit of Alixe's to break in upon her foster-mother's elected solitude, and to draw her, willy-nilly, out of her sadness. If madame perceived the kindly intention in these interruptions, she did

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not comment upon it, but accepted the maid's devotion with growing affection.

When Alixe entered, madame also seated herself near the window, yet did not take up any work, leaving the tambour frame and spinning-wheel both idle in their places. She regarded Alixe for a few moments in silence, wondering why the young girl did not speak, finally putting her dulness down to the fact that it was but yesterday morning they had bidden Flammeccœur and his squire God-speed on their journey to Normandy. Their long sojourn at Crépuscule had brought a gayety to the Castle that made it doubly dull now that they were gone. Madame pondered for some time on the subject, and presently spoke of it.

"Sieur Bertrand hath a dreary sky for his journey."

"But a promise of beauty in the land to which he goeth," responded Alixe, with something of an effort.

"Mayhap. I have not been in Normandy."

And here the conversation ended. They sat together, these two women, listening to the incessant beating of the heavy waves on the cliff far below, and to the tap, tap, of the rain

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upon the windows ; but neither found it in her heart to speak again. Alixe was shading her bird from blue into green, and Eleanore sat with folded hands, her eyes looking far away, musing upon the nothingness of her life. Suddenly there came a clamor at the door. Somewhat startled, Eleanore called admittance, and immediately David the dwarf walked into the room, stepped to the right of the doorway, and ushered in his companion, announcing her gravely, —

“Sœur Celeste from the Couvent des Madeleines.”

The sub-prioress, her white cloak and veil damp and stringing with rain, came slowly into the room and courtesied, first to Eleanore, then to Alixe.

Madame rose hastily, in some surprise, and went forward.

“Give you God’s greeting, good sister,” she said.

The nun returned the salutation, and then, with some hesitation, indicated the little dwarf in a gesture that showed her desire that he should leave the room. Madame accordingly motioned him away, and when he was gone,

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turned to the nun with a hint of anxiety on her face. The new-comer did not hesitate in her mission. Leaning over, she asked eagerly, —

“ Madame, is Angelique here, with you ? ”

Eleanore looked at her blankly. “ Laure ? — Laure is with you. Laure is — What sayest thou, woman ? ”

Sœur Celeste resignedly bent her head. For some seconds nothing was said. Alixe, her face grown ashen, her body changed to ice, rose, and moved to the side of madame. Then she asked softly, “ What hath happened, good sister ? ”

“ Angelique — Laure — the demoiselle — is not in the convent. We have searched for her everywhere. Her veil and wimple were found in her cell upon the bed. Beyond this there is no trace of her. This morning she came not to the church for prime, and we thought she had overslept. She hath so much fasted and prayed of late that Reverend Mother granted indulgence, and bade us let her rest. At breaking of the fast Sœur Eloise was despatched to her cell, and returned with word that she was not there. Since that hour even the daily services have been suspended, while we sought

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for her. In the garden we found footprints, — those of a woman, and of a man. Perchance they were hers — yet — ”

“ It is a lie ! That is a lie ! ” burst from Eleanore’s white lips. “ Woman, woman, unsay thy words ! No man hath ever seen her, — my Laure ! ”

“ I said it not, Madame Eleanore ; I but said mayhap,” ventured the gentle sister, timidly. But Eleanore did not hear her. White, rigid, her every muscle drawn tense, she stood there staring before her into space ; while Alixe, feeling this scene to be too intimate even for her presence, glided slowly from the room.

Immediately outside the closed door stood David the dwarf, moving restlessly from one spot to another, biting his thick lips, and working his heavy black brows with great nervousness. Seeing Alixe, he seized upon her at once.

“ I know what it is : Laure hath gone away, hath she not ? ”

Alixé simply nodded.

“ Yea, I know it, — with that scoundrelly *trouvère* ! ”

Alixé quivered as if she had been touched

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upon the raw ; but David paid no attention to her movement of pain.

“Come,” he jerked out nervously ; “come away from this room. Come below. I will tell thee what I saw in the fellow.”

The two of them walked silently across the broad upper hall and down the great staircase into the lower room, which was always deserted at this hour. Here Alixe and the dwarf seated themselves on tabourets at one of the long tables, and David began to talk. It seemed that he had watched Flammecœur closely, and had seen a good deal of his attentions to Laure ; knew how he rode with her to and from the priory, guessed Laure’s all too apparent feeling for him, and was aware that most of the hours in which the troubadour had supposedly hunted, hawked, or gone to St. Nazaire, had really been spent in the neighborhood of the priory, though how much he had seen of the nun, David could not know.

Alixé listened to him without much comment, and agreed in her heart with all that he said. But she was at a loss to comprehend her own bitterness of spirit at thought of what

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Flammecœur had done. She loved Laure truly; yet these sensations of hers were not for Laure, but for herself alone; and this girl, so acute at reading the minds of others, failed entirely to read her own; for had she not soundly hated Flammecœur? *Had* she hated him?

It was a heavy hour that these two, dwarf and peasant born, spent waiting for their lady to give some sign. At length, however, there were footsteps on the stairs, and both of them rose, as Eleanore, followed, not accompanied, by the white-robed nun, descended.

Madame was very erect, very brilliant-eyed, very white and stiff, but she had perfect control over herself. As she swept toward the great door, David could plainly see her state, and Alixe read well her heart; yet neither of them could but admire her splendid self-possession. Out of the Castle and into the courtyard she went, the three others following her, on her way to the keep. In the open doorway of the rough stone tower, she halted; and the dozen lolling henchmen within instantly started to their feet.

“My men,” she said, in a voice as steady

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and as commanding as that of a lord of Crépuscule, "my men, a great blow has fallen upon me, and a disgrace to all that dwell in this Castle. Laure, my daughter, your demoiselle, the lady of all our hearts, hath been stolen from the place of her consecration. She hath been abducted from the priory of the Holy Madeleine, by one that hath broken our bread, and received our hospitality. Bertrand Flammecœur, the troubadour, hath brought dishonor upon Le Crépuscule, and I ask you all to avenge your lord and me!"

Here she was interrupted by a chorus begun in low murmurs of astonishment, and now risen to a roar of wrath. After a moment she raised her hand, and, in the silence that quickly ensued, began again, —

"In the name of your lord, I bid you avenge us! Ride forth, every man of you, into the country-side, in pursuit of the flying hound. Go every man by a different road, nor halt by day or night till you bring me tidings of my child. And to him that shall find and bring her back to me, will I give honor and riches and great love, such as I would give to none that was not of noble blood. Go, nor stay to

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talk of it. — Go forth in the name of God — and bring me back my child ! ”

The men needed no further urging to action. As she ceased to speak they sprang from their places, and began preparations for departure with a spirit that showed their devotion to madame and to Laure. Madame stayed in the courtyard till Sœur Celeste and the last henchman had ridden away ; and then, when there was no more to see, she turned to Alixe, and, leaning heavily upon the young girl's shoulder, slowly mounted to her darkening chamber and lay down upon her tapestried bed. Alixe moved gently about the room, bringing her lady such physical comforts as she could, though these were not many. Neither of them spoke, and neither wept. Eleanore lay motionless, staring out into the dusk. Alixe's eyes closed every now and then, with a kind of deadly weariness that was not physical. But she did not leave madame.

After a long time, when it had grown quite dark, Alixe asked suddenly, —

“ Wouldst have a message sent to Rennes, madame ? ”

“ To Gerault ? No, it is too late. What

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could he do? Nay, I will not have the shame of his house published abroad in the Duke's capital. Speak of it no more." And, obediently, Alixe was silent.

It was now long past the early supper hour, but neither of the women went downstairs. The thought of food did not occur to Eleanore. Alixe sat by the closed window, brooding deeply. Darkness had come over the sea, and with it clouds dispersed so that a few stars glimmered forth, and at times a moon showed through the ragged mists. Downstairs the young men and maidens had resorted to their usual evening amusements of games, but they played without spirit, and finally, one by one, heavy with unvoiced foreboding, crept off to rest. David the dwarf had not been among them at all to-night. Ever since the ending of supper he had sat outside the door of madame's room, waiting, patiently, for some sound to come from within. Everything, however, was silent. From her bed the mother, tearless, bright-eyed, watched the broken moonlight creep along the floor, past the figure of Alixe. Her mind was filled with terrible things, — pictures of Laure, and of what the young

girl was doubtless enduring. For a long time she contained herself under these thoughts, but finally, racked with unbearable misery, she started up, crying aloud, —

“Alixé! Alixé! Methinks I shall go mad!”

As she spoke, madame rose from the bed, stumbled across the floor, flung open one of the windows, and looked out upon the splendor of the tumbling, moonlit sea. After a moment or two she felt upon her arm a gentle touch, and she knew that Alixé was beside her.

“Mad with thy thoughts, madame? Indeed, meseemeth Laure will not die. Doubtless the Sieur Trouvère loveth her —”

She was interrupted by a long groan.

“Madame?” she whispered, in soft deprecation.

“Not die, Alixé? Not *die*? Dieu! It were now my one prayer for her that she might quickly die!”

“Nay, what is there so terrible for her, save that she hath brought upon herself damnation an she die unrepentant? Wouldst thou not have her live to repent and be shriven?”

Eleanore groaned again. “Thou art too young to understand, Alixé. Ah! her pur-

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ity ! her innocence ! How she will suffer ! There is no suffering like unto it." Madame slipped to her knees, there by the window, and putting her arms upon the sill, buried her head in them, and drew two or three terrible breaths. Alixe, helpless, fighting to keep down her own secret woe in the face of this more bitter grief, felt herself useless. She remained perfectly still, looking out at the sea, but noting nothing of its beauty, till, all at once, madame began to speak again, in a muffled voice, —

"I remember well my wedding with the *Sieur du Crépuscule*. I was of the age and of the innocence of *Laure*. Never was mortal so happy as I, upon the day of the ceremony at *Laval*. I loved my lord, and he had given all his honor into my keeping. But had the bitterness of guilt been on me when I was brought home to *Le Crépuscule*, alone and a stranger in his house, I know not if I could have lived through the shame and bitterness of my first days. Thou canst not know, *Alix* ; but the humiliation of that time is as fresh in my memory as 't were but yesterday. Ah ! leave me now, maiden. Leave me alone. Thou'st been good and faithful to me, but a mother's

grief she must bear alone. Go thou to bed, child, and, in the name of pity, pray for thy sister!"

So she sent Alixe from the room, and made the door fast after her. After this she did not return to her place at the window, but began slowly to make ready for the night. When at length she was prepared, she wrapped herself closely in a warm woollen mantle, and went to her priedieu. Laure, from the priory, had ceased to accost Heaven. Therefore madame took her daughter's place, and thence through the night ascended an unceasing, bitter, commanding prayer that Laure should be restored to her mother's house, or else be mercifully received into the more accessible hereafter.

When morning dawned, her great bed had not been slept in, but throughout that day Eleanore sought no rest. She spent the hours passing from the hall to the keep and thence to the tower at the drawbridge, waiting, hoping, praying for tidings. During the afternoon three or four henchmen rode in, exhausted. But none of them had found any trace of Laure. One, however, who had taken the St. Nazaire road and had reached that town during the

night, had learned that Flammeccœur and his page had been there on the afternoon of the day they left Crépuscule. And, upon further search, this man found a shop where the trouvère had bought a lady's mantle and hood, both black. This was all the news that could be got; but it was enough to prove, without the least doubt, Flammeccœur's guilt.

Late in the afternoon Alixe went to work among the falcons, changing some of them from their winter-house to the open falconry in the field. Madame, seeing her at work, went out and watched her for a time. Alixe answered her few remarks with respect, but would not talk herself. The girl was dark-browed to-day, and very silent, and madame, perceiving that something troubled her, shortly left her to herself, and began to pace the damp turf. Hither, presently, came David, with the news that Monseigneur de St. Nazaire had come.

With a cry of sudden relief madame hurried back to the Castle, where the Bishop awaited her. He was gowned as usual in his violet, with round black cap, and gauntlet cut to show his ring. And as she came into the great hall,

he advanced to her with both hands outstretched and a look of trouble in his clear eyes.

"Eleanore, for the first time in many years I come to you in sorrow, to bring to you what comfort the Church can give," he said gently, fixing his eyes upon her to read how she had taken her blow, and from it decide what his attitude toward her should be. For St. Nazaire had a great and affectionate respect for Eleanore, and he was accustomed to treat her with a consideration that he used toward no other woman. It was for this that he had come to her in her grief, at the first moment that he heard the news of Laure's flight.

"Come thou into this room, where we can be alone," she said quickly, leading him into the round armory that opened off the great hall immediately opposite the chapel. Half closing the heavy door, she sat down on a wooden settle, motioning the Bishop to a tabouret near at hand.

"Is there any news of her? What hast thou heard?" she asked eagerly, bending toward him.

"I come but now from the priory, where I chanced to go to-day. This morning the girl

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Eloise, a lay sister, she that was accustomed to ride hither from the priory with Laure, confessed to many rides and love-passages between herself and Yvain the young squire, while Bertrand Flammeccœur followed Laure."

Madame drew a sharp breath, and the Bishop continued: "The girl is now under heavy penance; yet is she a silly thing, and in my heart I find no great blame for her."

"Then there hath been no word — no news — of Laure? Left she no token in her cell?"

"Nothing, Eleanore, nothing."

"Ah, St. Nazaire! St. Nazaire! how did we that cruel thing? How took we away from a young girl all her freedom, all her youth, all her love of life? Know I not enough of the woe of loneliness, that I should have sent her forth into that living death? Alas! alas! I am all to blame."

"Not wholly thou, madame. Perhaps the Church also," said the Bishop, softly.

Eleanore looked at him in something of amazement. It was the first time that he had ever suggested any criticism of the Church. But after these words had escaped him, the Bishop paused for a little and fixed upon

Eleanore a look that she read aright. It told her many things that she had guessed before, many unuttered things that had drawn her closely to St. Nazaire; but it told her also that these things must never be discussed between them; that never again would the man be guilty of so heretical an utterance as that which he had just voiced.

After this he began to speak again, still in the same tone of sympathy, but with a subtle difference in the general tenor of his views. He told her, in a manner eloquent with simplicity, of his talk with Laure on the eve of her consecration. He reminded Eleanore that Laure had entered of her own free will upon the life of a nun. He recalled the girl's contentment throughout the period of her novitiate; and finally, seeing that he had succeeded in obliterating some of the self-reproach in this woman to whom he was so sincerely attached, he began to prepare her for the blow that he was about to deal, to tell her what words could not soften, to inflict a wound that time could not heal, but which, according to the law of the Roman Catholic Church, he was bound to administer.

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Eleanore listened to his plausibly logical phrases with close attention. She sat there before him, elbow on knee, her head resting on her hand, her eyes wandering over the armor-strewn walls. The Bishop talked around his subject, circling ever a little nearer to its climax ; but he was still far from the end when madame, suddenly straightening up and looking full into his eyes, interrupted him to ask baldly : “ Monseigneur, hast thou never, in thy heart, known the yearning for a woman’s love ? ”

“ Many a time and oft, madame, I have *felt* love—a deeply reverent love—for woman ; and I have rejoiced therein, and given thanks to God,” was the careful reply.

But Eleanore had begun her attack, and she would not be repulsed in the first onslaught. “ And has no woman, Reverend Father, known thy love ? ” she demanded.

“ Madame ! ” A pale flush overspread St. Nazaire’s face. “ That question is not—kind,” he said haltingly, but without rebuke.

“ Nay. I am not kind now. Make me answer.”

St. Nazaire looked at her thoughtfully, and

weighed certain things in certain balances. Because of many years of the confessional and also of free confidence he knew Eleanore thoroughly, — knew how she had suffered every soul-torment; knew her unswerving virtue; sympathized with her intense loneliness. He prized her trust in him more than she was aware, and he feared to jeopardize that confidence now by whatever answer he should make. Ignorant of the purport of her questions, he yet saw that she was in terrible earnest in them. So finally he did the honest and straightforward thing. Answering her look, eye for eye, he said slowly: “Yea, Eleanore of Le Crépuscule, a woman hath known my love. What then?”

“Then if thou, a good man and as strong as any the Church ever knew, found that to human nature a loveless life is an impossibility, how shouldst thou blame a maid, high-strung, full of youth, vitality, emotions that she has not tried, for yielding to the same temptation before which thou didst fall? How is it right that the Church — that God — should demand so much? — should ask more than His creatures can give?”

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“Eleanore ! Eleanore ! thou shalt not question God !”

“I do not question Him. It is — it is —” untried in this exercise, she groped for words. “It is what ye say He saith. It is what ye declare His will to be that I question.”

“What, Eleanore, have I declared His will to be ? Have I yet blamed or chid the waywardness of Laure, whom indeed I loved as a dear daughter, — a child of purity and faith ?”

“Then, then,” Eleanore bent over eagerly, and her voice shook, — “then, an *thou* blamest her not, St. Nazaire, thou wilt not —” she clasped her hands in an agony of pleading, “thou wilt not put upon her the terrible ban ? Thou wilt not excommunicate her ?”

It was only then that the Bishop realized how skilfully she had led up to her point. He had not realized that he was dealing with perception engendered by an agony of grief and fear. As she reached her climax, he sprang to his feet, and began to pace the room, hands clasped behind him, brows much contracted, head far bent upon his breast. Eleanore, meantime, had slid to her knees and watched him as he moved.

“If thou wilt spare her, ask what thou wilt of me. I will do her penance, whatever thou shalt decree. I will give money ; I will give all that remains to me of my dower, freely and with light heart, to the Church. I will aid whomsoever thou wilt of thy poor, I —”

“Cease, Eleanore ! These things cannot avail against the Church. Thou must not tempt, thou must not question ; thou canst not understand *the Law* ! I am but an instrument of that Law, and am commanded by it. Laure, the bride of Heaven, hath forsaken her chosen life. She must endure her punishment, being guilty of—thou knowest the sin. Next Sunday the ban must be put upon her. In doing so, I but obey a higher power. Eleanore, Eleanore, rise from thy knees ! Thou art tearing at my heart ! Peace, woman ! Peace, and let me go !”

Eleanore, in her agony of despair, had crept to him and clasped his knees, mutely imploring the pity that he dared not show. Logic and reason he had put from him, holding fast to the tenets of that Church that had made him what he was. In all his career he had not been so tried, so tempted, to slip his

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duty. But, through the crucial moment, he did not speak ; and after that he was safe from attack.

After many minutes the mother loosed her clasp of him, and ceased to moan, and let him go ; for she saw that he could not help her. And as he passed slowly out of the room, she rose to her feet and looked after him blindly. Then she groped her way to the door, crossed the great hall, and, with her burden, ascended the stairs and went to her own room. Next morning, when the Bishop said mass in the chapel, madame, for the first time in thirty years on such an occasion, was not present. Nor did monseigneur seem astonished at the fact, but left his sympathy for her before he rode away to St. Nazaire.

All that afternoon and night, indeed, till after dawn of the next day, weary henchmen of the keep came straggling in on spent horses, fruitless returned from a fruitless quest. And when they were all back again, and the hope of seeing Laure was gone, the shadow of loneliness settled a little lower over the great pile of stone, and the silence within the Castle grew more and more intense to the aching heart within.

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In the general desolation of Castle life Alixe, the unnatural child of peasant blood, came very close to the heart of Eleanore. Through the long, budding spring madame fought a terrible battle with herself against an overpowering desire for an end of life, for the peace of death. And in these times Alixe often drew her away from herself by getting her to hunt and to hawk,—two amusements in which madame had been wont to indulge eagerly in her youth, and which she found were still possible for her, though she had grown to what she thought old-womanhood. Besides this, she and Alixe took the long walks that Laure had formerly delighted in; and the two ventured into many a deep cave in the sea-cliffs, and explored many crevices that no native of the coast would enter. In these places they found fair treasures of the sea, but were never accosted by any of the supernatural beings said to inhabit such spots. Nor, though they listened many times for it at twilight, did either of them hear, a single time, the long, low, wailing cries of the spirit of the lost Lenore.

In this way some pleasures entered unawares

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into the life of Eleanore. Perhaps there were other pleasures also, so simple and so familiar that she took no cognizance of them as such. Perhaps of a morning, in the spinning-room, when her fingers flew under some familiar, pretty task, and her ears were filled with the chatter of the demoiselles, who still strove after light-hearted joys amid their gray surroundings, she found forgetfulness of Laure's bitter disgrace. Or better still, when, at the sunset hour, she paced the grassy falcon-field, watching the glories of the sea and sky, there came to her heart that benison of Nature that God has devised for all of us in our days of woe. But when she was alone, in early afternoon, or, most of all, through the silent night-watches, she was sometimes overcome with sheer terror of herself and of her solitude. At such times she fought the creeping horror with what weapons time had given her, battling so bravely that she never suffered utter rout.

In a dim, quiet way the weeks sped on, leaving behind them no trace of what had been, nothing for memory to hang her lightest fabric on. In all the weeks that lay between Laure's flight and the coming of July, Elea-

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nore could remember distinctly just one talk beside the bitter one with St. Nazaire. And this other was with neither Alixe nor the Bishop, who, however, made it a point to come once in a fortnight to Le Crépuscule.

On a fair morning in May, as the dawn crept up out of the east not many hours after midnight, Eleanore rose, in the early flush, and, clothing herself lightly, left her room with the intention of going into the fields to walk. No one was to be seen as she entered the lower hall; but, to her amazement, the great door stood half open, and through it poured a draught of morning air, rich with the perfume of blossoming trees and fertile fields. Wondering that Alixe should have risen so early, Eleanore left the Castle and hurried out of the courtyard into the strip of meadow lying between the wall and the dry moat. Here, near the north edge of the cliff, sitting cross-legged in the grass, sat David the dwarf, holding in his hand something to which he talked in a low, solemn tone. Advancing noiselessly toward him, Eleanore perceived that it was a dead butterfly that he had found, and to which he was pouring out his soul. Amazed at the first phrases that

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caught her ears, she halted a few steps behind him, and there learned something of the thoughts that lay hidden in his volatile brain.

“White Butterfly, White Butterfly, thou frail and delicate child of summer, speak to me again! Say, hast thou found death as fair as life, thou White and Still? Came the messenger to thee unawares, or didst thou see his face and know it? Wast thou confessed, White Butterfly? Wentest thou forth absolved of all thy fluttering sins?

“Say, wanderer, didst love thy life? Wast afraid or sorrowful to leave it, in its dawn? Or foundest thou comfort in the thought of eternal rest for thy battling wings?

“And I, O living Thistledown, teach me my way! Shall I follow thee into the great world, to roam there seeking why men love to live? Or shall I also, like thee, leave it all? Shall I go, knowing nothing of the joy of life? Or, again, shall I practise a weary courtesy, and remain to bring echoes of laughter into that Twilight Castle, for the sake of the love I bear its Twilight Lady? Her life, my flutterer, hath been such a dream of tears as even thou and I, dead thing, have never known.

Yea, many a time while I laughed and shouted at the light crew of damsels that sleep there now, my heart hath bled for her. O Ghost of the Morning, know you what Eleanore, our lady, thinks of me, the fool? And yet, yet I do so deeply pity her — ”

“Thou pityest me, David?” echoed Eleanore, advancing till she stood before him, forgetful of how her appearance must startle him.

David looked up at her, winking slowly, like one that would bring himself out of a dream-world into reality. “Lady of Twilight, thou’rt a woman, lonely and mournful, forsaken of thy children. Therefore I grieve for thee,” he said slowly, gazing at her with his big eyes, but not rising from where he sat.

“A woman,” said Eleanore, looking at him with a half-smile, and echoing his tone, — “a woman doubtless is always to be pitied; and yet what man deems it so? Master David, ye are all born of women, and ye are all reared by them. Afterwards, in youth, ye wed, use us as your playthings for an hour, and then leave us in your gray dwellings, while ye fare forth to more manly sports and exploits. There in solitude we bear and rear again, and

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later our maidens wed and our sons depart from us, and for the last time, in our age, we are left alone to die. Truly, David, thou mayest well pity!"

David's wide mouth curved in a bitter smile.

"Even so, Madame Eleanore. And now, for fifteen years, I have lived as a woman lives. Mayhap by now I know her life better than other men — if, indeed, I am a man, being but little taller than the animals. And all these things said I to my dead friend here in my hand."

"'T is now fifteen years since thou camest with my lord to Crépuscule?"

"Ay, fifteen. I was then a boy of about such age. Fifteen years in Le Crépuscule by the sea! It is a lifetime."

Madame sighed. Then her face brightened again as she looked down at the dwarf. "What was the life of thy youth, David? 'T is a tale I have never heard."

"'T is but a little tale. Like my dead butterfly, I wandered. I come of a race of dwarfs, — all straight-backed, know you, and not ill to look upon. My father was a mountebank. My mother, who measured

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greater than was customary among us, cooked and sewed and travelled with us whithersoever we went in our wagon. When I was young, — at the age of five or thereabouts, — I began to assist my father in his entertainments. When I was fifteen we were in Rennes for the jousting season, and there thy lord saw me, bought me, and brought me back to you, lady, to be your merry jester. But indeed my laughter hath run low, of late. Long years I have bravely jested through ; but now the Twilight spell is creeping over me, and merriment rises no more in my heart. Indeed, I question if I should not beg leave of thee to go forth into the world again for a little time, to learn once more the song of joy. Yet when thou art near, and I look out upon the sea, and behold the sun lifting his glory out of the eastern hills, I ever think I cannot go, — I cannot leave this gentle home of melancholy.”

“Thou art free, David, if freedom is mine to bestow upon thee. Indeed, I could not ask that any one remain in this sad and quiet place, of any than his own will. Go thou forth into the world ! Go forth to joy and life and laughter. Fill thy little heart again

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with jests. Forget the brooding silence of *Le Crépuscule*, and laugh through the broad world to thy heart's content. Yet we shall miss thee sorely, little man."

Madame stopped speaking, and there was a pause. David seemed to have no response to make to her words. Instead he bent over the earth, digging a little hole in the sod. Into this he laid the dead form of his white butterfly. When he had covered it from sight with the black earth, and patted a little earthen mound over it, he rose to his feet with an exaggerated sigh.

"So I bury my friend — and my freedom. My desire is dead, Madame Eleanore, with my freedom. I will remain here among you women-folk, and keep you sad company or merry as you demand. Look! The rim of the sun is pushing over the line of the distant trees!"

"Yea, it is there — far away — in the land where Laure may be, deserted, mayhap, and a wanderer, cast out from every dwelling that she enters!"

Eleanore whispered these words, more to herself than to David. They were an expres-

sion of her eternal thought. The dwarf heard them, and sought some comfort for her. But her expression forbade comfort; and, in the end, he did not speak at all. The two of them stood side by side and watched the sun come up the heavens. Presently the Castle awoke, and shortly Alixe came out to the field to feed the young *niais* and the mother-birds in the falcon-nests. So Eleonore, when she had given the young girl greeting, returned to her solitude in the Castle, finding her heart in some part relieved of its immediate burden.

One by one the lengthening days passed. June came into the world, and palpitated, and glowed with glory and fire, and then died. During this time not a word had come from distant Rennes to tell the Lady of Crépuscule how Gerault fared. The midsummer month came in, and the young men and maidens of the Castle grew gay with the heat, and made riotous expenditure of the riches of Nature. That year the whole earth seemed a tangle of flowers and rich meadow-grass, with which young demoiselles played havoc, while the squires and henchmen hawked and hunted and

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drank deep. These days stirred Eleanore's heart once more to love of life, and woke the sleeping soul of Alixe to strange fits of passionate yearning after unattainable ideals. The living earth brought fire to every soul, and the pinched melancholy of winter was dead and forgotten.

On the night of the seventh of July the Castle sat unusually late at meat, for the Bishop had arrived unexpectedly, and, being in a merry mood, deigned to entertain the whole Castle with tales and jests. Just in the middle of a story of Church militant in the war of the three Jeannes, there came the grating noise of the lowering drawbridge, a faint echo of shouts from the men-at-arms in the watch-tower, and the clatter of swift hoofs over the courtyard stones. Half a dozen henchmen ran to open the great door, while Eleanore rose with difficulty to her feet. Her heart had suddenly come into her throat, and she had turned deathly white with an unexpressed hope and an inarticulate fear. There was a little pause. The new-comer was dismounting. Then, after what had seemed a year of waiting, Courtoise walked into the

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hall, advanced to his liege lady, and bent the knee.

“Courtoise!” gasped Eleanore, faintly.
“Courtoise — thy message!”

“Madame,” he cried, “I bring joyful tidings from my lord! He sends thee health, greeting, and duty, and prays you to prepare the Castle for a great feast; for in a week’s time he brings home his bride from Rennes!”

CHAPTER SIX

A LOVE-STRAIN



LATE that night, when the little throng below had been as nearly satisfied with information concerning the great event as three poor hours of steady talking from Courtoise could make them, Eleanore sat in her own room alone with the messenger, there to learn those intimate details of Gerault's wooing, that none but her had right to know. She questioned Courtoise eagerly, earnestly, repeatedly, with such yearning in her eyes that the young squire's heart smote him to see what her loneliness had been.

"Tell me again, Courtoise, yet once again !
She is fair, this maid ? "

"As fair as a rose, madame ; her skin composed of pink and white, so cunningly mingled

that none can judge which hath most play upon it. And her eyes are blue like a mid-summer sky; and she hath clouds of hair that glisten like meshes of sun-threads, crowning her."

"And she is small and delicately formed?"

"She is slender and fragile; yet is she in no way sickly of body."

"And her name," went on madame, musingly, "is Lenore! Is that not a strange thing, Courtoise? Is't not strange that a second time this name should have entered so deeply into the life of thy lord? Was he glad that it so chanced, Courtoise; or did he hesitate to pronounce it again?"

"I know not if it troubled him at first, madame. But this I know: that he is happy in her."

"Then the dear God be thanked! I ask no more. Ah! It seems that at last I can pray again with an open heart. 'T will be the first time since—since—" Suddenly Eleanore began to tremble. "Courtoise," she whispered, pale with dread, "hath thy lord heard—of—of Laure's flight?"

Courtoise bent his head, answering in a

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strained voice : " My lord had news of — of the flight late in the month of March. Monseigneur de St. Nazaire sent us the word of it, and for many weeks my lord hunted the country over for a trace of her. And when he found her not, nor any word of her, he forbore, in his grief, to write to thee, dear lady, lest he should cause thy tears to flow again."

" I thank the good God that he knows ! " murmured Eleanore. " It had been more than I could bear that Gerault should come home to find his wedding feast blackened with a new-learned shame."

" Yea, Lady Eleanore."

" And so now, Courtoise, go thou to thy rest ; for I have kept thee long, and thou'rt very weary. And on the morrow there must be a beginning of making the Castle bravely gay for the home-coming of its lord and its bride. Likewise, on the morrow thou must tell me more of the young Lenore, my daughter."

Courtoise smiled wearily, and then, with proper obeisance, hurried off to his own room, a little triangular closet opening into Gerault's old bedroom on the first floor. When the

squire was gone, his liege lady also laid her down; and for the first time in many months sank easily to sleep. For happiness is the best of doctors, and this that had come to her was a greater happiness than Eleanore had thought ever to know again.

Through the next week the very dogs about the Castle caught the air of bustle and eager life that had laid hold of it. Never, since the days of the old lord and his crews of drinking barons, had *Le Crépuscule* shown such symptoms of gayety. Every scullion scampered about his pots and kettles as if an army of Brittany depended on him for nourishment. The henchmen hurried about, polishing their armor and their steel trappings till the keep glittered as with many mirrors, and they broke off from this labor now and then to see that the stable-boys were at work on the proper horses or to dissolve into thunderous roars of laughter at a neighbor's jest. The young demoiselles were giddy with excitement. They pricked their fingers with spindles, they broke innumerable threads on the wheels, they stopped the loom to dance or sing in the middle of the morning; and while they were arranging the

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rooms where the train of the young bride were to lodge, they gossiped so ardently over possible future gayeties that their very tongues were like to drop off with weariness. As for the squires, all five of them, headed by Courtoise, were to ride out to Croitôt on the Rennes road, as an additional escort for Seigneur Gerault. And the parade they made over this matter was more than Montfort had for his coronation at Rennes when the great war ended.

There were, however, three silent workers in the Castle who did more than all the rest together; and they were silent only because their hearts were too full for speech. These were madame, Alixe, and David the dwarf. While the little man worked at the decoration of the chapel, the women adorned the bridal chamber; and in all that week of preparation, not a soul save these two set foot over that sacred threshold. Madame had selected the room. It was not Gerault's usual chamber, but one on the second floor, on the northwest corner of the Castle, separated from madame's room only by the place in which Laure had slept of old, and which madame now kept closed to all save herself.

For the adornment of Gerault's and Lenore's apartment, madame brought out the old historic tapestries, embroideries, and precious silken hangings that had been for years stowed away in great chests in the spinning-room. The bed was hung with curtains in which were woven illustrations of the "Romant of the Rose," a poem that had once been much recited in *Le Crépuscule*. On the walls were great squares of tapestry representing the battles of the family of Montfort. On the floor were two or three strips of precious brocade, brought out of the East a century before by some crusading lord. Finished, the room looked very rich, but very sombre; and, this being the fashion of the times, it was satisfactory to all that saw it. Eleanore only, with eyes new-opened by the thought of approaching happiness, feared the room a little dark, a little heavy for the reception of so delicate a creature as the young Lenore. But every one else in the Castle was in such delight over its appearance that she left it as it was. Meantime the lower hall was hung with banners and scarred pennants and gay streamers; and then the pillars were wreathed with greenery and

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flowers till the still, gray place was all transformed, and resembled a triumphal hall awaiting the coming of a conqueror.

Thus the week of waiting passed merrily and rapidly away, and the day of the departure of Courtoise and the squires for Croitôt speedily arrived. With them also went a picked half-dozen men-at-arms, who were bursting with pride at this honor done their brilliant steel and smooth-flanked horses. After their going, when everything in the Castle was in readiness for the reception, a little wave of reaction set in among those left at home. Eleanore retired to commune with her own happy mind. David sought solitude in which to arrange a programme of welcome. And Alixe, seized with a sudden mood of misery, fled away to a certain cave in the base of the Castle cliff, and here wept and raged by herself, for some undefined reason, till her tears cleared the mists from her soul, and she was herself again. Still, as she returned to the Castle, she knew that there remained a bitterness in her heart. Eleanore, who had long ago come to mean mother to her, had, in the last month or two, for the first time given her almost a mother-

love, that had fed Alixe's hungry heart as the body of the Lord had never fed her soul. And now this love was to be taken away again. A real daughter was coming into the household, a daughter by the marriage of the Seigneur; and this, Alixe knew, must be a closer tie than any of time or custom. She must go back to her old place, the place she had held in the days of Laure; but she could never hope to find in the stranger the beautiful friendship that had existed between her and her foster-sister.

That evening was a quiet one in the Castle. Monseigneur of St. Nazaire had arrived in the afternoon; but he seemed wearier than his wont, and, out of consideration for him, Eleonore ordered the general retirement at an early hour.

The next day, the great day, dawned over Le Crépuscule, red and clear and intensely hot. Every one was up before the sun; and when fast had been broken and prayer said in the chapel, every one went forth to the meadow, some even down to the moor, half a mile below the moat, to gather flowers to be scattered in the courtyard for the coming of the

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bride. The party was expected to arrive by noon at latest; and, as the morning waned, Eleanore found herself uncontrollably nervous. Alixe and David both stood in the watch-tower, looking for the first sign of horses and banners on the edge of the forest at the foot of the long hill. Noon passed, and the earliest hour of afternoon, and the Castle was on tiptoe with excitement. At two o'clock came a cry from Alixe, in the tower. Down the hill, round the sweep in the road, was the flutter of a blue and white pennant, presently flanked by a longer one of gray. There was a pause of two or three moments. Then the trumpeters dashed out from the keep, ranged up before their captain, and blew a quick, triumphal, if somewhat jerky, fanfare. There was an outpouring of retainers into the courtyard, and presently, from far away, came the faint sounds of an answering blast from Gerault's heralds. As this died away, a great shout of excitement and delight arose from the waiting company, now massed about the flower-strewn drawbridge, and only at this time Madame Eleanore came out of the Castle.

Many eyes were turned upon her as she

crossed the courtyard, bearing herself as royally as a princess. She was garbed in flowing robes of damask, white, and olive green, silver-studded, and her head was dressed in those great horns so much in fashion at this time, but seldom affected by her, and now lending an unrivalled majesty to her appearance.

Madame took her place at the right of the drawbridge, and, like all the throng, strained her eyes toward the approaching cavalcade that contained the future of *Le Crépuscule*. Apparently madame was very calm. In reality her heart beat so that it was like to suffocate her, for now Gerault's form took on distinct shape before her eyes. The sun shot serpents of light around his helmet and his steel-encased arms, while over his body-pieces he wore the silken surcoat of pale gray, embroidered with the arms of his Castle. Gerault's lance, held in rest, fluttered a pennant of azure and white, the colors of his lady; and Courtoise, who rode just behind his master, carried the gray streamer of *Le Crépuscule*.

Amid a tumult of blaring trumpets, vigorous shouting, and eager choruses of welcome and greeting, the Lord of *Crépuscule*, with his

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bride on her white palfrey beside him, rode across the drawbridge of the Twilight Castle. Just inside the courtyard Gerault halted, leaped from his horse, and ran quickly to embrace his mother. When he had held her for a moment in his arms, he turned, lifted his lady from her horse, and, amid an embarrassing silence of curiosity, led the young girl up to madame.

“In the name of *Le Crépuscule* and of its lord, I bid thee welcome to this Castle, my daughter ! Good people, give greeting to your lady !”

Men and maidens, serving-maids and henchmen, still gazing wide-eyed at the figure of the Seigneur's wife, sent forth an inarticulate buzz of welcome and of admiration ; and, when it had died away, Gerault took his bride by the hand, and, with Eleanore upon the other side, moved slowly across the courtyard toward the Castle doorway, where now stood the Bishop of St. Nazaire, waiting to add his welcome to the newly wed. Nor did the Bishop refrain from a little exclamation of pleasure at sight of the young wife, as she sank upon her knees before his mitre, to receive a blessing.

A few moments later the whole company

crowded into the brilliantly decorated hall and moved about, each selecting a desired place at the great horse-shoe table ready prepared for the feast. Gerault was standing in the middle of the room, looking about him in surprise and pleasure at the preparations made to do him honor. Presently, however, he turned to his mother, who stood close at his elbow, and said, after a second's hesitation: "I do not see Alixe, madame. Is she not here in the Castle?"

Eleanore looked about her in some surprise. "Hast not seen her? Where hath she been? Ah, yes, there she stands, in yonder corner. Alixe! Hither!"

"Alixe!" echoed Gerault; and strode to where she stood, half concealed, between the staircase and the chapel door, her head drooping, her eyes cast down.

"Come, Alixe, and greet Lenore. She hath heard much of thee, and I would have you friends, for you are both young, and you must be good companions here together." So he took her hand and kissed her, and led her out to where Eleanore and the young wife stood waiting.

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“Lenore, this is my foster-sister. La Rieuse have we called her, and she is well named. Give her greeting —” Gerault came to rather a halting pause; for the attitude of the two women nonplussed him.

Lenore stood motionless, suddenly putting on a little dress of dignity, and looking steadfastly into the dark face of the other girl. Alixe, anything but laughing now, was absorbing, detail by detail, the delicate and exquisite personality of Gerault’s bride. More fairy-like than human she seemed, with her slender, beautifully curved child’s figure, her face neither white nor pink, but of a transparent, pearly tint indescribably ethereal, in which were set great eyes of violet hue, and all around which floated her hair, — that wonderful hair that was, indeed, a captive sun-ray. The curve of Lenore’s lips, the turn of her nostril, the poise of her head, and the delicacy of her hands and feet, all proclaimed her noble birth. The dress that she wore set off her beauty as pure gold makes a gem more brilliant. She wore a loosely fitting bliault of greenish blue, embroidered in long, silver vines, while her undersleeves and yoke were of frosty cloth of silver. Her head

was crowned with a simple circlet of gold, far less lustrous than her hair ; and from it, at the back, fell a veil of silver tissue that touched the hem of her robe. All this dress was disordered and dusty with long riding ; but the carelessness of it seemed to become her the better. In the rich heat of the July sun she had seemed a little too colorless, a little too pale and misty, for beauty ; but here, in the cool shadows of the great stone hall, she was brighter than any angel.

Alixé examined her long and carefully, to the confusion of the girl, whose feeling of strangeness and embarrassment continually increased. In the face of “ La Rieuse ” it was easy to read the struggle between jealousy and admiration. Alixé was, secretly, a worshipper of beauty ; and beauty such as this of Lenore’s she had never seen before. In the end it triumphed. Alixé’s eyes grew brighter and brighter as she gazed ; and presently, when the strain of silence was not much longer to be endured, there burst from her the involuntary exclamation, —

“ God of dreams ! How art thou fair ! ”

And from that moment the allegiance of Alixé was fixed. She was on her knees to

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Lenore, this fair usurper of her place, this Gerault's bride.

Presently the moving company resolved itself into order, and each sought his place at the table, where the Seigneur and St. Nazaire now stood side by side, at the head, with Lenore upon Gerault's left hand, madame on St. Nazaire's right, and Alixe next madame and opposite Courtoise, who was placed beside the bride. There was a long Latin grace from the Bishop, and then the feast began. It was like all the feasts of the day, a matter of stuffing till one could hold no more, and then of drinking till one knew no more; for, to the commoner folk, and those below the salt, this was the greatest pleasure in life. To those for whom the feast was given, and to the rest of the little group at the head of the table, the whole business was sufficiently tedious: not to say, however, that monseigneur and even Gerault showed no symptoms of fondness for a morsel of peacock's breast, or a calf's head stuffed with the brains, pounded suet, and raisins, over which was poured a good brown gravy. Courtoise and Alixe also displayed healthy appetites. But madame and Lenore, whether from

excitement or other causes, sat for the most part playing with what was put before them, and eating nothing.

After half an hour at the table Madame Eleanore found herself watching, with rather unexpected interest, the attitude of Gerault toward his wife. And she perceived, with a kind of dull surprise, that his attentions savored of perfunctoriness. The Seigneur failed in no way to do his lady courtesy ; but that air of tender delight that the personality of the young girl would be expected to draw from a young husband, was not there. Whatever impression of indifference madame received, however, she admitted no such thing to herself. Her heart was too full of joy for Gerault, and for *Le Crépuscule*. For, great as had been her hopes of her son's choice, her dreams had never pictured a being so rare and so lovely as this who was come to dwell at her side in the gray and ancient Castle.

As for Lenore herself, she seemed to see nothing but devotion in Gerault's attitude toward her. She sat with a smile upon her face, playing daintily with what she had to eat, answering any question or remark put

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to her with a straightforwardness that had in it no taint of self-consciousness, even addressing a sentence or two of her own to Courtoise on her right; but at the same time holding all heart and soul for Gerault. The Seigneur did not speak much with his wife, but answered her modest glances with an air of mild indulgence, taking small notice of anything that went on round him save the keen looks now and then shot from the scintillating green eyes of Alixe. Of all the tableful, Alixe was the only one that found any food for thought in the situation before her; and, surprisingly enough, the key to her reflections lay in the curious behavior of Courtoise, who, as time went on, became so uneasy, so fidgety, so restless, that Gerault finally leaned over the table and asked him rather sharply if he were ill.

In the course of time, however, the last jack was emptied, the last song sung, the last questionable story told. Monseigneur de St. Nazaire rose and repeated the ending grace, and then the whole drowsy, witless company followed him into the glowing chapel, where a short mass was performed. Lenore and Gerault knelt side by side to the right of the

altar, with Eleanore a little behind them, where she could watch the bright candle-rays vie with the radiance of Lenore's golden hair, and see where the silvery bridal robe overlapped a little the edge of the gray surcoat of *Le Crépuscule*, that swept the floor beside it. The mother-eyes were all for the girlish form of the new daughter; and her heart went out again to Gerault, who had brought this fairy creature to *Le Crépuscule*, in place of her who had been so terribly mourned.

Lenore listened to the repetition of the mass with a reverent air, but without much thinking of the familiar form. Her mind was busy with thoughts of these new surroundings and the faces of the new vassals and companions. Gerault, her beloved, was at her side; the great silver crucifix that hung over the altar gave her a sense of comfort and protection, and she found a restful pleasure in the tones of the Bishop's voice. The bright candle-light that shone into her eyes produced in her a semi-hypnotic state, and she seemed to have knelt there at the altar but three or four minutes when the words of the benediction fell upon her ears, and presently the

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whole company was trooping out into the great hall, whence all signs of the feast had been removed.

In the same dreamlike way, Lenore went with her husband and madame upstairs, to the room that had been prepared for her and Gerault. Here her two demoiselles were already unpacking the coffer which had come from Rennes with them. And here she removed her travel-stained garments, bathed the dust from her face and arms, was combed and perfumed like the great lady she had become, and lay down to rest for a little time in the twilight, with new ministers to her comfort all about her. Later, as it grew dark, she dressed again and descended to the great hall, where further merriment was in progress.

The demoiselles and squires of the Castle were now holding high revel, and their games caused the old stone walls to echo with laughter and shrieks of delight. In one corner of the room madame and the Bishop sat together over a game of chess. Gerault was near them, where he could watch the battle; but his eyes were often to be seen following the light figure of Lenore through the mazes of the dances and

games in which she so eagerly joined. The sports in which these maidens and young men grown indulged, were commonly played by older folk throughout France, and have descended almost intact to the children of a more advanced and less light-hearted age. Lenore entered into the play with a pleasure too unconscious not to be genuine. She laughed and sang and chattered, and put herself at home with every one. She was soon the leading spirit of the company, as she had been wont to be in her own home. The games were innumerable: *Pantouffle*, *Pince-Mérille*, *Bric*, *Qui Féry*, *Le Roi qui ne Ment pas*, and a dozen others. And were there a forfeit to be paid in the shape of a kiss, she instantly deserted Courtoise and David, who, enraptured with her youth and gayety, kept close on either side of her, and delivered it with shy delight to Gerault, who scarcely appeared to appreciate the gifts he got.

In the course of time a "Ribbon Dance" was ordered, and madame and monseigneur actually left their game to lead it, drawing Gerault with them into the sport. Obediently he gave one hand to Lenore, the other

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to Alixe, and went through the dance with apathetic grace, bringing by his half unconscious manner the first chill upon Lenore's happy evening. This was, however, the end of the amusement ; and when the flushed and panting company finally halted, Gerault at once drew his wife to madame's side, himself saluted his mother, and then followed Lenore up the torchlit stairs. In ten minutes the whole company had dispersed, and Eleanore remained alone in the great hall.

When she had extinguished all the lights below, madame passed up the stairs, putting out the smoking torches as she went, and, reaching the upper hall, went immediately to her own bedroom. Here she slipped off the heavy mantle and the modified "cote-hardi." Then, clad only in a long, light, damask tunic, she went over to one of the wide-open west windows, and, leaning across its sill, looked out upon the vasty, murmurous, summer sea. Low on the horizon, among a group of faint clustering stars, swung the crescent moon, which was reflected in the smooth surface of a distant wave. A great, fresh, salt breath came up like a tonic through the wilted air. The voice of

the sea was infinitely soothing. Eleanore listened to it eagerly, her lips parted, her eyes wandering along that distant wave-line; her thoughts almost as far away. Presently the door of her room opened, softly; and some one paused upon the threshold. Instinctively she knew who it was that entered. Half turning, she said gently, —

“Thou’rt come here, Gerault?”

Her son came forward slowly, halted a few steps away, and held out one hand to her. She went to him and took it, wondering a little at his manner, but not questioning him. Quietly she drew the young man to the window where she had been; and both stood there and looked out upon the scene. They were silent for a long time. It was intensely difficult for Gerault to speak; and madame knew not how to help him. At length, in a voice that sounded slightly strained, he asked: “Thou’rt pleased with her? Thou’rt satisfied, my mother?”

“Oh, Gerault! Gerault! She is so fair, so delicate, so like some faery child! I almost fear to see her beauty fade in the shadow of these gray walls.”

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“ And will she — Lenore — help thee, in a way, to forget thy grief in Laure ? ”

Eleanore gave a sudden, involuntary sob ; for none had pronounced that name to her since the early spring. The sob was answer enough to Gerault’s question. But in a moment she said, in a voice that was perfectly controlled : “ Methinks I love her, thy lady, already. Ah, my son, she is very sweet ! Very, very sweet and fair ! ”

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE LOST LENORE



WHEN Gerault left her to go to his mother's room, on that first evening in the Castle that was to be her home, Lenore was still fully dressed. As soon as she was alone, however, she made herself ready for the night; and then, wrapping herself about in her long day-mantle, went to a window overlooking the sea, and sat there waiting for her lord's return. Now that the excitement of the day, of the arrival, of meeting so many new people, all eager to make her welcome, was over, Lenore began to feel herself very weary, a little homesick, a little wistful, and tremulously eager for Gerault's speedy return. She clung to the thought of him and her newly risen love, with pathetic anxiety. Was it not lawful and right

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that she should love him? Was it not equally lawful and therefore equally certain that he must love her? She knew little enough of love and of men, young Lenore; yet this idea came to her instinctively, and it seemed impossible that it could be otherwise. It was so recently that she had been a little girl in all her thoughts and pleasures and habits, that this sudden transition to the dignified estate of wifhood had left her singularly helpless, singularly dependent on the man whom she had married out of duty and fallen in love with afterwards, on the way from Rennes. Gerault helped her, in his way. He was kind, he was gentle, was solicitous for her comfort, and required of her nothing but a quiet demeanor. But that he failed in some way to give her what was her due, the young girl rather felt than knew.

While she waited here alone, looking out upon the lonely sea, that was so new and so wonderful a sight to her, the Lady Lenore bitterly regretted and took herself to task for her gayety of the evening. The silly games that she had once so loved to play — alas! he had not joined in them, doubtless thought

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them trivial and unbecoming in a woman grown and married! She had made herself a fool before him! He was older than she, and wiser, and a gallant knight. Lenore's cheeks flushed with pride as she remembered how he could joust and tilt at the ring. She remembered when she had first seen him, from the gallery of the list at Rennes, when he unseated the Seigneur Geoffrey Cartel. This lordly sport was as simple to him as her games to her. Little wonder that she had exhausted his patience! And yet—if he would but come to her now! She was so sadly weary; and it grew so late. Her little body ached, her temples throbbed, her eyes burned with the past glare of the sun on the white dust, and the recent flickering light of the torches. If he would but come back, and forgive her her childishness, and kiss her before she slept, she would be very happy.

In point of fact Gerault did come soon. Knowing that Lenore must be weary, he remained but a short time with his mother, and returned immediately to his wife. The moment that he entered the room, Lenore

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rose from her place, and ran to him with a faint cry of delight.

“At last thou art come! Thou art come!” she said indistinctly, not wanting him to hear the words, yet unable to keep from saying them.

“And didst thou sit up for me, child, and thou so weary? I went but to give my mother good-night, for thou knowest ’t is long since I saw her last. She sent thee her blessing and sweet rest; and my wish is fellow to hers. Come now, child.”

Gerault lifted her up in his arms, and, carrying her to the bed, laid her down in it, mantle and all. In the carrying, Lenore had leaned her head upon his shoulder, and her two tired arms folded themselves around his neck. How it was that Gerault felt no thrill at this touch; that it was almost a relief to him when the hold loosened; and how, though he slept at her side that night, his dreams, freer replica of his day-thoughts, were filled with vague trouble, he himself could scarce have told; and yet it was so.

Next morning, however, Gerault watched her waken, looking as rosy and fresh as a child,



ONLY one among them seemed
not of their mood.—Page 31

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and smiling a child's delighted welcome at the new day. Unquestionably she was a pleasure to him at such times. Before her marriage he had liked, in thinking of her, to accentuate her fairy-like ways, because through them he had brought himself to marry her. And now his treatment of her resembled most, perhaps, the treatment of something very fine and fair, something very rare and delicate and generally to be prized, but not really belonging to him, not essentially valued by him, or near at all to his human heart.

When they were ready for the day, the two of them, Lenore and Gerault, did not linger together in their room, but descended immediately to the chapel, where morning prayers were just beginning. Every eye was turned upon them as they entered the holy room; and it was as sunshine greeting sunshine when Lenore faced the open window, through which poured the golden light of July. Madame's heart swelled and beat fast, and that of Alixe all but stopped, as each beheld the morning's bride; and they perceived, with a kind of dull surprise, that Gerault's face was as dark-browed, as reserved, as melancholy as ever. It seemed

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impossible that he should not be moved to new life by the presence and possession of so fair a thing as this Lenore. Yet when the devotions were at an end, and the Castle household rose and moved out to where the tables were spread for the breaking of the fast, no one noted how the young girl's blue eyes glanced once or twice a little wistfully, a little forlornly, up into the unmoved face of her husband, and that she got therefrom no answering smile.

In celebration of the Seigneur's wedding, a week's holiday had been declared for every one in the Castle; and so, when the first meal of the day was at an end, the demoiselles, in high glee at escaping from the morning's toil in the hot spinning-room, gayly proposed to their attendant squires that they repair at once to the open meadows, where there was glorious opportunity for games and carols. Lenore's eyes lighted with pleasure at this proposal; but she looked instinctively at Gerault, to see if his face approved the plan. She found his eyes upon her; and, as he caught her glance, he motioned her to his side, and drew her with him a little apart from the general group. Then he said to her kindly, —

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“Beloved, I shall see thee at noon meat. Courtoise and I go forth this morning together to try two of the new falcons that Alixe hath trained. Thou ’lt fare gently here with all the demoiselles and the young squires ; and see that thou weary not thyself at play in the heat. Till noon, my little one ! ”

He bent and touched his lips to her hair, — that sunlit hair, — and then, as he strode away, followed, but half willingly, by Courtoise, Lenore’s head bent forward, and her eyes, that for one instant had brimmed full, were shut tight till the unbidden drops went back again. When she looked up once more, Alixe was at her side, and the expression on the face of La Rieuse was full of unlooked-for tenderness. Lenore, however, was too proud for pity, and in a moment she smiled, and said bravely :

“My lord is going a-hawking with his squire. Shall we to the fields? Said they not that we should go to weave garlands in the fields? ”

“Yes! To the fields! To the fields! Hola, David! We are commanded to the fields by our Queen of Delight!” called Alixe, loudly, waving her hands above her head, and striving

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in every way to gain the attention of the company. But in spite of her efforts, Gerault's departure was seen, and there was a general outcry of protest, which did not, however, reach the ears of the Seigneur. Then Lenore was forced to bear the comments of the company: their loudly expressed disappointment, and the unspoken but infinitely more painful astonishment plainly indicated in every glance. Nevertheless the young girl had in her the instincts of a fine race, and she bore everything with a heroic unconcern that won Alixe's admiration, and so far deceived the thoughtless throng as to bring her a new accusation of indifference to Gerault's absence.

To the girl-bride that morning passed—somehow. It was perhaps the bitterest three hours she had ever endured; yet she would not confess her disappointment even to herself. Besides, was not Gerault coming home again? Had he not said that he would be back at noon? Had he not called her "beloved"? Her heart thrilled at the thought; and she forgot the fact that Gerault knew that she could ride with hawk on wrist and tell a fair quarry when she saw it. She forgot that at such times as this

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even hawking will generally give way to love ; and that he is a sorry bridegroom that loves his horse better than his bride. Yet she forgave him for the time, and regained her smiles until the shadow of a new dread fell upon her. She could endure the morning ; but the afternoon ? Would he remain with her through the afternoon ? Alas, here was the terrible pity of it ! She could not tell.

However, this last dread proved to be groundless. Gerault made no move to leave the Castle again that day. Perhaps he even felt a little guilty of neglect ; or perhaps her greeting on his return betrayed to him how she had suffered through the morning. However it was, as soon as the long dinner was at an end, the Seigneur and his lady were observed to wander away into the armory, and they sat there together, on the same settle, until the shadows grew long in the courtyard and the afternoon was nearly worn away. What they said to one another, or how Gerault entertained his maid, no one knew ; for, oddly enough, Courtoise had put himself on guard at the armory door, and would permit none to venture so much as a peep into the room on which his

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own back was religiously turned. So for that afternoon demoiselles and squires chose King and Queen of their revels from among their own number, and perhaps enjoyed their games the better for that fact.

When the sun was leaning far toward the broad breast of the sea, all the Castle, mindful of their souls, repaired to the chapel for vespers, a service held only when the Bishop was at *Le Crépuscule*. Gerault and Lenore were the last to appear, and while the Seigneur's expression was rather thoughtful than happy, it had in it, nevertheless, a suggestion of Lenore's repressed joy, so that madame, seeing him, was satisfied for the first time since his home-coming.

But alas for the thoughts and hopes that this afternoon had raised in the observing ones of *Le Crépuscule*, Lenore and her husband were not seen again to spend a single hour alone together. Gerault remained for the most part with the general company of the Castle, not seeking to escape to solitude with Courtoise, but holding his lady from him at arm's length. His attitude toward her was uneasy. He did not avoid her, but, were they

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by chance left alone together for ten minutes, his manner changed till it was like that of a man guilty of some dishonorable thing. Oftentimes, when they were with a number of others, Gerault would be seen to watch Lenore closely, and his eyes would light with momentary pleasure at some one of her unconscious graces. But the light never stayed. Quickly his black brows would darken, the shadows re-cover his face, and he would be more unapproachable than before.

In the course of a few days, Lenore began to grow morbidly sensitive over her husband's attitude ; and, out of sheer misery, she began to avoid him persistently. This brought a still more bitter blow to her, for she discovered that he was glad to be avoided. Lenore was desperate ; but still she was brave, still she held to herself ; and if at times she sought refuge with madame and Alixe, those two kindly and pitying souls met her with outstretched arms of silent sympathy, and never betrayed to her by so much as a glance how much they had observed of Gerault's incomprehensible neglect.

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The holiday week passed, and with its end came a spirit of relief that it was over. Next morning the usual occupations were begun, and Lenore went up to the spinning-room with the rest of the women. This work-room was on the second floor, and ran almost the whole length of the south side of the Castle: a long, narrow room, with many windows looking out upon the courtyard, and only a sideways view of the hazy, turquoise sea. Here was every known mechanical contrivance for the making of cloth and tapestry, and their development out of the raw wool. The loom, just now half-filled with a warp of pale green, stood at the east end of the room; the fixed combs, the half-dozen spinning-wheels, the tambour-frames for embroidery, and the great tapestry-border frame, were ranged in an orderly line down the remaining length, and each of the maidens had her particular task of the summer in some stage of completion. Since Lenore's arrival a spinning-wheel had been set up here for her, and she sat down to it at once, while her demoiselles were directed by madame to begin work on the tapestry border, at which four could apply the needle at the same time.

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As the roomful settled quickly to work, under the general guidance of madame, Lenore began to tread her wheel and draw out thread with a hand practised enough to win the approval even of Eleanore. And as the morning wore along, Lenore found herself unaccountably soothed and comforted by her task and the kindly atmosphere of perseverance and attention to duty surrounding her.

Nevertheless, it was not a comfortable day for such work. The heat was intense. Fingers grew constantly damp with sweat. Thread knotted and broke, silk drew, and little exclamations of anger and disgust were frequently to be heard. However, the labor was continued as usual for three hours, till eleven o'clock, the dinner-hour, came, and the little company willingly left the spinning-room to another afternoon of silence, and went downstairs to meat. At the foot of the stairs stood Gerault, waiting for Lenore; and when she reached him he kissed her upon the brow before leading her to table. In that moment the girl's heart sang, and she felt that her day had been fittingly crowned.

In the early afternoon Lenore found that

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there were new occupations for all the Castle. The demoiselles were despatched to the long room on the first floor, which, though not dignified by the name of library, yet took that place, for instruction in certain things, mental and moral, by the friar-steward, Father Anselm. The young men were at sword practice in the keep. And Lenore, who could write her name and read a little from parchment manuscripts in both Latin and French, and whose education was therefore finished, was summoned by madame and taken over the whole Castle, receiving, at various stages, instruction in domestic duties and the management of the great building. She saw everything, from the linen-presses upstairs to the wine-cellars underground; and everywhere the hand of madame was visible in the scrupulous exactness and neatness with which the Castle was kept. Then in her heart Lenore determined that in time she would learn madame's habits, and, if it could be done in no other way, win Gerault's respect by her abilities as a housekeeper.

The hours of late afternoon and early evening were devoted to recreation, which was en-

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tered into with new zest by every one. To be sure, Gerault sat all evening with his mother, playing draughts. But his eyes occasionally strayed to the figure of his wife; and later, when the Castle was still, and Lenore, in the great curtained bed, was wandering on the borderland of sleep, she felt that this day was the happiest she had yet spent in *Le Crépuscule*; and she knew in her heart that work and work only could now bring her peace. And thereafter, poor little dreamer, a smile hovered upon her face as she slept!

On the tenth day of the new regime in *Le Crépuscule*, squire Courtoise sat in the armory, polishing the design engraved on his lord's breastplate. Courtoise was moody. Ordinarily his cheerfulness in the face of insuperable dulness was something to be proud of. But latterly his faith, the one great faith in his heart,—not religion, but utter devotion to his lord—had been receiving a series of shocks that had shaken it to its foundation. Courtoise was by nature as gentle, genial, and kindly a fellow as ever held a lance; and in his heart he had for years blindly worshipped Gerault. His creed of devotion, indeed, had

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embraced the whole family of Le Crépuscule, because Gerault was its head. Till the time of their last going to Rennes, there had been for him no woman like madame, no such maid as Laure, and no man anywhere comparable to his master. Poor Laure had dealt him a grievous blow when she followed Flammeccœur from the priory. But from the day of Gerault's betrothal to little Lenore, the daughter of the Iron Chateau had held his heart in her hand, and might have done with it as she would. Loving the two of them as he did, and seeing each day fresh proof of Lenore's affection for her lord and his, Courtoise naturally looked for a fitting return of this from the Seigneur. And here, all in a night, Courtoise's first great doubt had entered in. They had been married three days, they were barely at Le Crépuscule, before Courtoise saw what made him sick with uneasiness. If the Seigneur had wedded this exquisite maiden with the sunlit hair, must he not love her? And yet — and yet — Courtoise sat in the armory and polished freely at the steel, and swore to himself under his breath, recklessly incurring whatever penance Anselm should see fit to

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give. For here it was mid-afternoon, and his little lady just freed from her hours of toil; and there was Gerault gone off by himself, without even his squire, forsooth, to hawk with the Iron-Beak over the moor!

Courtoise had been indulging himself in ire for some time, when a shadow stole past the doorway of the armory. He looked up. The shadow had gone; but presently it returned and halted: "Courtoise!"

The young fellow leaped to his feet, and the breastplate clattered to the floor. Lenore, looking very transparently pale, very humbly wistful, and having just a suspicion of red around her eyes, was regarding him tentatively from the doorway.

"Ma dame, what service dost thou ask?"

"None, Courtoise," the voice sounded rather faint and tired. "None, save to tell me if thou hast lately seen my lord."

The expression on her face was so pathetic that Courtoise was suddenly struck to the heart, and he bit his tongue before he could reply quietly enough: "Ma Dame Lenore, Seigneur Gerault rode out long time since a-hawking; and methinks he will shortly now

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return. The hour for evening meat approaches. I — I — ” he broke off, stammering; and Lenore without speaking bowed her head, and patiently turned away.

Courtoise sat down again when she left him, and remained motionless, the steel on his knees, his hands idle, staring into space. Suddenly he leaped to his feet and hurled the breastplate to the floor with a smothered oath. “Gray of St. Gray!” he cried, “what devil hath seized the man I loved? Gerault, my lord, rides out and leaves this angel to weep after him! Gray of St. Gray! what desires he more fair than this his Lenore? What — what — what — ” the muttered words died into thoughts as Courtoise clapped a cap on his head and strode away from the armory and out of the Castle.

In the courtyard the first object that met his eyes was Gerault’s horse, standing in front of the keep, with a stable-boy holding him by the bridle. Gerault himself was in the doorway of the empty falcon-house, holding a *hagard* on his wrist, while two dead pigeons swung from his girdle.

“Courtoise! Behold our spoils! Hath not

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Talon-Fer done Alixe's training honor?" cried Gerault, the note of pleasure keener than usual in his voice.

Courtoise, flushed with rising anger, went over to him. "My lord, the Lady Lenore asks for thee!" he said a little hoarsely, paying no attention to the dead pigeons or the young falcon.

Gerault very slightly raised his brows, more at Courtoise's tone, perhaps, than at the words he spoke. "The Lady Lenore," he said.

"Even so — the Lady Lenore — thy wife!"

"I understand thee, good Courtoise."

The veins in the younger man's neck and temples stood out under the strain of repression. "Comes my lord?" he asked slowly.

"In good time, Courtoise. The *hagard* must be fed." Gerault would have turned away, but Courtoise, with a burst of irritation, exclaimed, —

"I will feed the creature!"

Now Gerault turned to him again: "Hast thou some strange malady or frenzy, that thou shouldst use such tones to me, boy?"

"Tones — tones, and yet again tones! Gerault — thou churl! Ay, I that have been faith-

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ful squire to thee these many years, I say it. Thou churl and worse, to have wedded with the sweetest lady ever sun shone upon, to bring her, a stranger, home to thy Castle, and then leave her there, day following day, while thou ridest over the moors to dally with some bird! All the Castle stares at the cruelty of thy neglect. Daily the demoiselles whisper together, wondering what distemper thy lady hath that thou seest her not by day — ”

“Hush, boy—hush! Thou’rt surely mad!” cried out Gerault, with a note in his voice that gave Courtoise pause.

Then there fell between them a silence, heavy, and so binding that Courtoise could not move. He stood staring into his master’s face, watching the color grow from white to red and back again, and the expression change from angry amazement to something softer, something strange, something that Courtoise did not know in his lord’s face. And Gerault gnawed his lip, and bent low his head, and presently spoke, in a voice that was not his own, but was rather curiously muffled and unnatural.

“Thou sayest well, Courtoise. ’T is true I

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have neglected her, poor, frail, pretty child ! Ah ! I had never thought how I have neglected her ” ; and Gerault sat suddenly down upon the step of the falcon-house and laid his head in his hands, in an attitude of such dejection that Courtoise experienced a swift rush of repentance.

For some time there was again silence between them. Courtoise, thoroughly mystified by the whole situation, had nothing whatever to say. Finally the Seigneur stood up, this time with his head high, and his self-control returned. He put the falcon, screaming, into his squire’s hands, and took the bodies of the pigeons from his belt.

“ So, Courtoise, I leave them all with you. Where is the Lady Lenore ? ”

“ Sooth, I know not ; yet methinks when she left the armory where she had spoken to me, she passed into the chapel.”

“ I go to her. And I thank thee, Courtoise, for thy rebuke.”

“ My lord, my lord, forgive me ! ” Courtoise choked with a sudden new rush of devotion for his master. He would have fallen on his knees there on the courtyard stones, but that

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the Seigneur, with a faint smile at him, was gone, carrying alone the burden of his inexplicable sorrow.

The Lady Lenore was in the chapel, half kneeling, half lying upon the altar-step. In the dim light of the shadowy place her golden hair and amber-colored garments glimmered faintly. She was not praying, yet neither was she weeping, now. The long, hot loneliness of the afternoon had thrown her into a state of apathy, in which she wished for nothing, and in which she refused to think. She had no desire for company; but had any one come — David, or Alixe, or Madame — she should not have cared. It was only Gerault that she would not have seen in this place and attitude. The thought of Gerault was continually with her, as something omnipresent; but at this especial hour she felt no wish to see the man himself. Yet now he came. She heard a tread on the stones that sent a tremor through her whole body. Then some one was kneeling beside her, and a quiet voice said gently in her ear, —

“Lenore! — My child! — Why art thou lying here?”

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Lenore tried hard to speak ; but her throat contracted convulsively, and she made no answer.

“ Child, art thou sick for thy home ? Thou hast found sorrow here, and loneliness, in this new abode. Perhaps thou wouldst have had me oftener at thy side. Is it so, Lenore ? ”

The girl’s golden head burrowed down into her arms, and she seemed to shake it, but she did not speak.

Gerault looked about him a little helplessly. Then, taking new resolution, he put one arm about her, and, drawing her slight form close to him, he said in a halting and broken way : “ Come, my wife — come with me for a little time. Let us walk out together to the cliff by the sea. The sun draws near the water — the afternoon grows rich with gold. — And thou and I will talk together. — Lenore, much might I tell thee of myself, whereby thou couldst understand many things that trouble thee now. Knowing them, and with them, me, thou shalt more justly judge me. Come, little one, — rise up ! ” He drew her to her feet beside him, and then, with his arms still around her, he stood and put his lips to her half-averted

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cheek. Under that kiss she grew cold and tremulous, but still preserved her silence. Then the two moved, side by side, out of the Castle, through the courtyard, and on to the outer terrace that ran along the very edge of the precipitous cliff against which, far below, the summer sea gently broke and plashed.

Here, hand in hand, the Seigneur and his lady walked, looking off together at the glory of the mighty waters. The crimson sky was veiled in light clouds that caught a more and more splendid reflection of the fiery ball behind them ; while the moving waves below were stained with pink and mellow gold. Lenore kept her eyes fixed fast upon this sight, while she listened to what Gerault was saying to her. He talked, in a fitful, chaotic way, of many things : of his boyhood here, of Laure his sister, and Alixe, and of "one other that was not as any of us,—our cousin, a daughter of Laval, whose dead mother had put her in the keeping of mine."

So much mention of this girl Gerault made, and then went on to other things, jumbling together many incidents and scenes of his boyhood and his youth, never guessing that

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Lenore, who continued so quietly to look off upon the sea, had seized upon this one little thing that he had said, and realized, with a woman's intuition, that the story of his heart lay here. As Gerault rambled on, he came gradually to feel that he had lost her attention, and so, little by little, as the sunset light died away, he ceased to speak, and there crept in upon them, over them, through them, that terrible silence that both of them knew: the all-pervading, ghostly silence that haunted this spot; the silence that had brought the name upon the Castle,—the Château du Crépuscule. Lenore grew slowly cold with miserable foreboding, while Gerault, rebelling against himself, was struggling to break the bonds of his own nature.

“Well named is this home of ours, Lenore,” he said sadly.

“Yea, it is well named,” was the reply.

“Wilt thou — be — lonely forever here? Art thou lonely now? Hast thou a sickness for thy home and for thy people?”

For an instant Lenore hesitated. At Gerault's words her heart had leaped up with a great cry of “Yes”; and yet now there

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was something in her that withheld her from saying it. When at last she answered him, her words were unaccountable to herself, yet she spoke them feelingly: "Nay, Gerault. Thou hast taken me to be one with thee. Thou hast brought me here to thy home, and it is also mine."

A light of pleasure came into Gerault's face, and he took her into his arms with a freer and more open warmth than he had ever shown her before. "Indeed, thou art my wife—one with me—my sweet one—my sweet child Lenore! And this my home is also thine,—Château du Crépuscule!"

Suddenly Lenore shivered in his clasp. That word "Crépuscule" sounded like a knell in her ears, and as she looked upon the gray walls looming out of the twilight mists, the very blood in her veins stood still. Whether Gerault felt her dread she did not know, but he did not loose his hold upon her for a long time. They stood, close-clasped, on the edge of the cliff, looking off upon the darkening sea, till, over the eastern horizon line, the great pink moon slipped up, giving promise of glory to the

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night. The cool evening breeze came off the waters. They heard the creaking and grating of the drawbridge, as it was raised. Then a flock of sea gulls floated up from the water below, and veered southward, along the shore, toward their home. Finally, in the deepening west, the evening star came out, hanging there like a diamond on an invisible thread. Then Gerault whispered in the ear of Lenore, —

“Sweet child, it is late. The hour of evening meat is now long past. Let us go into the Castle.”

Lenore yielded at once to the pressure of Gerault’s arm, and let herself be drawn away. But she carried forever after the memory of that quiet half-hour, in which the mighty hand of nature had been lifted over her to give her blessing.

Courtoise the faithful had kept the two from a summons at the hour of supper; and on their return they found food left upon the table for them; but, what was unusual at this time, the great room was empty. Only Courtoise, who was again at work in the armory, knew how long they sat and ate and talked

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together, and only he saw them when they rose from table, passed immediately to the stairs, and ascended, side by side. Then the young squire knew that they would come down no more that night; and he guessed what was really true: that on that evening Lenore's cup of happiness seemed full; for, as never before, Gerault claimed and took to himself the unselfish devotion that she was so ready to give. When she slept, a smile yet lingered round her lips; nor, in that sleep, did she feel the change that came upon her lord.

Not many hours after she had sunk to rest, Lenore woke slowly, to find herself alone in the canopied bed. Gerault was not there. She put out her hand to him, and found his place empty. Opening her eyes with a little effort, she pushed the curtains back from the edge of the bed, and looked about her. It could not be more than twelve o'clock. The room was flooded with moonlight, till it looked like a fairy place. The three windows were wide open to the breath of the sea; and beside one of them knelt Gerault. He was wrapped in a full mantle that hid the lines of his figure;

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and Lenore could see only that his brow rested on the window-sill, that his shoulders were bent, and his hands clasped tight on the ledge beyond his head. Unutterable pain was expressed in the attitude.

What was he doing there? Of what were his thoughts? Why had he left her side? Above all, what was his secret trouble? These questions passed quickly through Lenore's brain, and her first impulse was to rise and go to him. Had she not the right to know his heart? Had he not given it to her this very night? She looked at him again, asking herself if he were really in pain; if he were not rather simply looking out upon the moonlit sea, and was now, perhaps, engaged in prayer, to which the beauty of the scene had lifted him. She would go to him and learn.

She sat up in bed, pushed her golden hair out of her neck and back from her face. Then she drew the curtains still farther aside, preparatory to stepping out, when suddenly she saw Gerault lift his head as if he listened for something far away; and then she caught the whispered word, "Lenore!"

For some reason, she could not have told

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why, Lenore did not move, but sat quite still, staring at him. She heard him say again, more loudly, "Lenore!" but he did not turn toward her bed. Rather, he was looking out, out of the window, and down the line of rocky shore that stretched away to the north.

"Lenore! I hear thee! I hear thy voice!" he whispered, to himself, fearfully. "I hear thee speaking to me.—Oh, my God! My God! When wilt Thou remove this torture from my brain?" He rose to his feet and lifted his arms as if in supplication. "It is a curse upon me! It is a madness, that I cannot love this other maiden. Thou spirit of my lost Lenore!—Lenore!—Lenore!—Thou callest to me from the sea by day and night!—Only and forever beloved, come thou back to me, out of the sea!—Come back to me!—Come back!" His hands were clenched under such a stress of emotion as his girl-wife had never dreamed him capable of. Now he stood there without speaking, his breath coming in sobbing gasps that shook his whole frame. The beating of his heart seemed as if it would suffocate him, and his body swayed back and forward, under the force of

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his mental anguish. For the first time in all his years of silent grief, he gave way unreservedly to himself; let all the pent-up agony come forth as it would from him, as he stood there, looking off upon that wonderful, inscrutable, shimmering ocean, that had played such havoc with his changeless heart.

From the bed where she sat, Lenore watched him, silent, motionless, afraid almost to breathe lest he should discover that she was awake. But Gerault wist nothing of her presence. He had known no joy in her, in the hallowed hours of the early night; else he could not now stand there at the window, calling, in tones of unutterable agony and tenderness, upon his dead,—

“Lenore! Lenore! Come back!—O sea—thou mighty, cruel sea, deliver her up for one moment to my arms! Let me have but one look, a touch, a kiss.—Oh, my God!—Come back to me at last, or else I die!”

He fell to his knees again, faint with the power of his emotion; and Lenore, the other, the unloved Lenore, sat behind him, in the great bed, watching.

The moonlight crept slowly from that room,

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and passed, like a wraith, off the sea, and beyond, into the east. The stars shone brighter for the passing of the moon. There was no sound in the great stillness, save the rustling murmur of the outflowing tide. In the chilly darkness before the break of dawn, Gerault of the Twilight Castle crept back to the bed he had left, looking fixedly, through the gloom, at the white, passive face of his wife, who lay back, with closed eyes, on her pillow. And when at last he slept again, she did not move; yet she was not asleep. In that hour her youth was passing from her, and she, a woman at last, entered alone into that dim and quiet vale where those that lived about her had wandered so long, so patiently, and, at last, so wearily, alone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

TO A TRUMPET-CALL



AFTER the night of Gerault's passion, twelve days ebbed and flowed away without any incident of moment in the Castle. How much bitter heart-life was enacted in that time, it had indeed been difficult to tell. Lenore wondered, constantly, as she looked into the faces about her and questioned them as she refused to question her own heart. If, beneath that cloak of lordly courtesy and calmness, Gerault could hide such a grief as she knew was buried in his soul; if she herself found it so easy to conceal her own knowledge of that bitterest of all facts, that she was a wife unloved, — what stories of mental anguish, of long-hidden torture, might not lie behind the impassive masks around her. There was

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Madame Eleanore, madame of the commanding presence and infinitely gentle manners. What was it that had generated the expression of her eyes? Lenore had scarcely heard the name of Laure, thought only that there had been a daughter in Crépuscule who had died long since; and so she wove a little history of her own to account for that haunted look so often to be found in madame's dark orbs. Gerault she knew. Alixe puzzled her, but there also she found food for her morbidness. Courtoise and the demoiselles she did not consider; but David the dwarf held possibilities. The young woman's new-sharpened glance quickly discovered that the jester suffered also from the devouring malady, and she wondered over and pitied him also.

Indeed, at this time, Lenore was in an abnormal and unhealthy frame of mind. It seemed to her that all the world lived only to hide its sorrows. But her melancholy speculations concerning the nature of the griefs of others saved her from the disastrous effects of too much self-analysis. Her love for Gerault, to which she always clung, led her to pity him as he would not have believed she could have

pitied any one ; and, unnatural as it seemed, she brooded as much over his sorrow as over her own. Melancholy she was, indeed, and older by many years than when she had first come to *Le Crépuscule*. Sometimes the fact that Gerault did not know how much she knew brought her a measure of comfort, but it made her uneasy, also, for she was not sure that she was not wrongfully deceiving him. She could not bring herself to confess to Father Anselm what she felt no one should know ; and neither did she find it in her heart to tell Gerault himself of her inadvertent discovery, though had she but done this last, all might have come right in the end. But from day to day she put away from her the thought of speaking, and from day to day she drew closer into herself, till she was shut to all thought of confiding in him who had the right to know the reason of her unhappiness.

Gerault, however, was not unobserving, and he noticed the change in her very early in its existence. It was an intangible thing, elusive, changeable, varying in degree. All this he realized ; but, man-like, never guessed the reason for it, never knew that Lenore herself

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was unconscious of it. Did she desire to coquet with him, render him uneasily jealous of every one on whom she turned her eyes? If so, it was useless, for the knight believed himself incapable of jealousy in regard to her. He had married her for the sake of his mother, and for *Le Crépuscule*, — much as the fact did him dishonor. In the very hour of their highest love, his thoughts had been all for another; and when she slept he had left her side to cry into the night and the silence, unto that other, of whom this young Lenore had never heard. Despite these confessed things, the *Seigneur Gerault* felt in some way hurt when the timid shadow of his wife no longer haunted him by day, nor stretched to his protecting arm by night. She had withdrawn from him into herself, and even his occasional half-hours of devotion failed to bring any light into her eyes, though she treated him always with half-tender courtesy. Her lord was not a little puzzled by her new manner, but he took it in his own way; and there was presently a stiffness of demeanor between the two that would have been almost laughable had it not been so pathetically cruel to Lenore.

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The month of July passed away, and August came into the land. Brittany, long blazing with sunlight, lay parching for want of rain. The moors grew brown and dusty, and the meadow flowers bloomed no more. But the blue sea shimmered radiantly day by day, and the sunsets were ever more glorious and more red.

On a day in the first week of the last summer month, when Anselm had found the temperature too great for the casting of choice paragraphs of Cicero before the unheeding demoiselles, when the Castle reeked with the smell of cooking, and the air outside was heavy with the odor of hard-baked earth, Gerault sat in the long room alone, reading Seneca from an illuminated text. A heretical document this, and not to be found in a monastery or holy place; yet there were in it such scraps of homely wisdom and comfort as the Seigneur — something of a scholar in his idle hours — had failed to find in Holy Scripture.

In its dimly lighted silence the long room was, at this hour, a soothing place. The row of small casement windows were open to the sea, and two or three swallows, coming up from the water below, flitted through the room, and

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once even a sleek and well-fed gull came to sit upon a sill and flap his wings over the flavor of his last fish.

Gerault's back was turned to the light; yet he knew these little incidents of the birds, and took pleasure in them. A portion of his mind rejoiced lazily in the quiet and solitude; the rest was fixed upon the Latin words that he translated still with some lordly difficulty. He found himself in the mood to consider the thoughts of men long dead, and was indulging in the unsurpassed delight of the philosopher when, to his vast annoyance, Courtoise pushed aside the curtains of the door, and came into the room followed by another man. Gerault looked up testily; but as he uttered his first word of reproach, his eye caught the dress of his squire's companion, and he broke off with an exclamation: "Dame! Thou, Favriole?"

"May it please thee, Seigneur du Crépuscule," was the reply, as the new-comer advanced, bowing. He was elaborately and significantly dressed in a parti-colored surcoat of blue and white silk, emblazoned behind and before with the coronet and arms of Duke Jean of Brittany. His hosen were

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also parti-colored, yellow and blue, and the round cap that he held in his hand was of blue felt with a white feather. At his side hung the instrument of his calling, a silver trumpet on a tasselled cord; for he was a ducal herald, and, before he spoke, Gerault knew his errand.

“Welcome, welcome, Favriole!” he said kindly. “What is thy message now? Surely not war?”

“Nay, Seigneur Gerault! A merrier message than that!” Lifting his trumpet to his lips, he blew upon it a clear, silvery blast, and, after the rather absurd formality, began: “Oyez! Oyez! Oyez! Be it known to all princes, barons, knights, and gentlemen of the Duchy of Brittany and the dependency of Normandy, and to the knights of Christian countries, if they be not enemies to the Duke our Sire, — to whom God give long life, — that in the ducal lists of Rennes in Brittany, upon the fifteenth day of this month of August in this year of grace 1381, and thereafter till the twentieth day of that month, there will be a great pardon of arms and very noble tourney fought after the ancient customs,

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at which tourney the chiefs will be the most illustrious Duke of Brittany, appellant, and the very valiant Hugo de Laci, Lord in vassalage to his Grace of England, of the Castle Andelin in Normandy, defendant. And hereby are invited all knights of Christian countries not at variance with our Lord Duke, to take part in the said tourney for the glory of Knighthood and the fame of their Ladies."

Favriole finished, smiling and important, and from behind him rose a little buzz of interest. For, at sound of the trumpet, almost all the Castle company had hurried from their various retreats to learn the meaning of the untoward sound. In this group, not foremost, standing rather a little back from the rest, was Lenore, gravely regarding Gerault, where he sat with the parchment before him. She had recognized Favriole, the herald, for a familiar figure in the lists at that long-past tournament where she had first thought of being lady of her lord; and she grew a little white under the memories that the herald brought her. Gerault had seen her at the first moment of her coming, and, as soon as Favriole finished his announcement, beckoned her to his side.

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She came forward to him quietly, and took her place, acknowledging the pleased salute of the visitor with the slightest inclination of her golden head. When she was seated at the table, Gerault, who had risen at her coming, spoke :

“ Our thanks to you, Sir Herald, for your message, which you have come a long and weary way to bear to the one spurred knight in this house. And devotion to our Lord, Duke Jean, who — ” Gerault paused. His mother had just come to the room and halted on the threshold, a little in front of the general group, her eyes travelling swiftly from Favriole’s face to that of Lenore. Gerault, his thought broken, hesitated for an instant, and turned also to look at his wife. Instantly Lenore rose, and advanced a step or two to his side. Then she said in a curiously pleading tone, —

“ I do humbly entreat my lord that he will not refuse to enter this tournament; but that he will at once set out for Rennes, there to fight for — for ‘ the glory of his Knighthood, and the — the fame of his — Ladies’ ! ”

When Lenore had spoken she found the whole room staring at her in open amazement.

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Gerault gave his wife a glance that brought her a moment's bitter satisfaction,—a look filled with astonishment and discomfort. Long he gazed at her, but could find no softening curve in her white, set face. Every line in her figure bade him go. At length, then, he turned back to Favriole, with something that resembled a sigh, and continued his speech.

“Sir Herald, carry my name for the lists; and my word that on the fifteenth day of this month I shall be in Rennes, armed and horsed for the tourney. My challenge shall be sent anon.—Courtoise! Take thine ancient comrade to the keep, and find him refreshment ere he proceeds upon his way.”

Courtoise bowed, wearing an expression of mingled pleasure and disapproval, and presently he and the herald left the room together, followed by all the young esquires. After their disappearance the demoiselles also wandered off to their pursuits, and presently Gerault, Eleanore, and Lenore were left alone in the long room. Eleanore stood still, just where she was, and looked once, searchingly, from the face of her son to that of his wife. Then she addressed Gerault: “See that thou

come to me to-night, when I am alone in my chamber. I would talk with thee, Gerault." And with another look that had in it a suggestion of disdain, madame turned and went out of the room.

When she was gone the knight drew a long sigh, and then, with an air of apprehensive inquiry, faced Lenore. At once she rose and, with a very humble courtesy, started also to depart. But Gerault, whose bewilderment at the situation was changing to anxiety, said sharply : " Stay, Lenore ! Thou shalt not go till we have spoken together."

Immediately she returned to her place and sat down. She gave him one swift glance from under her lashes, and then remained in silence, her eyes fixed upon the floor.

At the same time the Seigneur got to his feet and began to pace unevenly up and down the room. His step was sufficient evidence of his agitation ; but it was many minutes before he suddenly halted, turning to his wife and saying in a tone of command : " Tell me, Lenore, why thou biddest me go forth into this tournament."

" Ah, my lord—do not—I—" she paused,

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and, from flushing vividly, her face grew white again: "Thou wilt be happier in Rennes, my lord."

"How say you that? Were I not happier at home here with my bride?"

"Asks my lord wherefore?" answered Lenore, in a tone containing something that Gerault could not understand.

"Nay, then, I ask thee naught but this: wouldst thou, all for thyself, of thine own will, have me go? Dost thou in thy heart desire it?"

Lenore drew her head a little high, and looked him full in the face: "For myself, for mine own selfish desires, of mine own will, I entreat thee by that which through thy life thou hast held most dear, to go!"

Gerault stared at her, some vague distrust that was entering his mind continually foiled by the open-eyed clearness of her look. Finally, then, he shrugged his shoulders, and, as he turned away from her, he said: "Be satisfied, madame. I do your bidding. I give you what pleasure I can. In ten days' time I shall set off; and thou wilt be unfettered in this Crépuscule!"

And with this last ungenerous and angry taunt, the Seigneur, his brain seething with some emotion that he could not define, strode from the room. Lenore rose as he left her, and followed him, unsteadily, half-way to the door. He went out of the Castle without once looking back, and when he was quite gone, the young girl felt her way blindly to the chair where she had sat, and crouching down in it, burst into a flood of repressed and desperate tears.

When Gerault left Lenore's side, he was no whit happier than she. After the herald had made his announcement of the tourney, and Gerault had begun his reply, it was his intent to refuse to go, though in his secret heart he longed eagerly to be off to that city of gay forgetfulness. But when his wife, Lenore, the clinging child, besought him, with every appearance of sincerity, to leave her, he heard her with less of satisfaction than with surprised disappointment. Now he fought with himself; now he questioned her motive; again he longed for Rennes and the tourney. Finally, there rushed over him the detestable deceit in his own attitude; and he began to curse himself

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for what, sometimes, he was, — the most intolerant and the most selfish of tyrants. In these varying moods Gerault rode, for the rest of the afternoon, over the dry moors, hawk on wrist, but finding his own thoughts, unhappy as they were, more engrossing than possible quarries. He returned late — when the evening meal was nearly at an end; and he perceived, with dull disappointment, that Lenore was not at table. Madame presently informed him that she lay in bed, sick of a headache; and this was all the conversation in which he indulged while he ate his hurried meal. But as soon as grace was said and the company had risen, Gerault started to the stairs. Instantly his mother caught his sleeve and held him back, saying, —

“Go not to thy room. She has perchance fallen asleep by now; and she should not be wakened, for she hath been very ill. Seek thou rather my bedchamber, and there presently I will come to thee; for I have somewhat that I would say to thee, Gerault.”

Feeling as he had sometimes felt when, in his early boyhood, he had waited punishment for some boyish misdeed, the Seigneur obeyed

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his mother, and went up to her room, which was now wrapped in close-gathering shadows. Here, a few moments later, Eleanore found him, pacing up and down, his arms folded, his head bent upon his breast, a dark frown upon his brows. The windows were open to the evening, and, like some witchcraft spell, its sweetness entered into Gerault, penetrating to his brain, and once again turning his thoughts to the spirit that haunted all *Le Crépuscule* for him.

Madame came into the room, drawing the iron-bound door shut behind her, and pushing the tapestry curtain over it. Then, without speaking, she crossed the room, seated herself on her settle beside the window, and fixed her eyes on the moving form of her son. Under her look Gerault grew more restless still; and he was about to break the silence when presently she said, in a low, rather grating tone: "Know, Gerault, that I am grieved with thee."

He turned to her at once with a little gesture of deprecation; but she went on speaking:

"Thou hast brought home from Rennes a wife: a fair maid and a gentle as any that hath

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ever lived ; and moreover one that loves thee but too well. In her little time of dwelling here she hath, by her quiet, lovely ways, crept close into my heart, that was erstwhile so bitterly empty. And having her here, and seeing her growing devotion to thee, her continual striving to please thee in thine every desire, methought that thou, a knight sworn to chivalry, must needs treat her with more than tenderness. Yet that hast thou not, Gerault. Dieu ! 'Thou 'rt all but cruel with her ! God knows thy father came to be not over-thoughtful in his love of me. Yet had he neglected and spurned me in our early marriage as thou hast this bride of thine, I had surely made end of myself or ever thou camest into the world. Shame it is to thee and to all mankind how — ”

“ Madame ! Madame ! — Forbear ! ”

At his tone, Eleanore held her peace, while Gerault, after a deep pause, in which he regained his self-control, began, —

“ Canst thou remember, my mother, a talk that we — thou and I together in this room — held one afternoon more than a year ago ? 'T was in this room, the day before I went last to Rennes. Thou didst entreat me to

bring thee back a wife to be thy daughter in the place of Laure.

“At that hour the idea was impossible to me. Thou knowest — ’fore God thou knowest — the suffering that time has never eased for me. A thousand times I had vowed then, a hundred times I swore thereafter, that the image of mine own Lenore should never be replaced within my heart; and it holds there to-day as fair and clear as if it were but yesterday she went.

“Many months passed away, madame, and I saw this golden-haired maiden about Rennes, — in the Ladies’ Gallery in the lists, and at feasts in the Castle; yet I had never a thought in my heart of wedding with her. Then — late in the spring — St. Nazaire sent me message of Laure’s disgrace, her excommunication; and my heart bled for thee. I sent out many men to search my sister, but not one ever gathered trace of her. Then, when there was no further hope of restoring her to thee, the idea of marriage came to me for the first time as a duty — toward thee. My whole soul cried out against it. Lenore de Laval reproached me from the heaven where

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she dwells. And yet—in the end—for *thy* sake, madame, I brought home with me the gentle child men call my wife.

“I confess it to thee only: I do not love her. Yet indeed none can say that I have used her ill, save as I could not bring myself falsely to act the ardent lover. If she hath been unhappy, then am I greatly grieved. Yet what hath she not that women do desire in life? What lacks there of honor or of pleasure in her estate? Moreover, if she has lost her own mother, hath she not gained thee, dear lady of mine? Mon Dieu, madame,—think not so ill of me. I swear that for me she yearns not at all. Even this afternoon, when all of you had departed from the long room, she did implore me, with sincerest speech, that I depart at early date for Rennes. How likes you that? And moreover, to all my questioning, she did stoutly deny that my going would be for aught but her own pleasure, and would in no way grieve her heart.” And Gerault stared upon his mother with the assured and exasperated look of a doubly injured man.

Madame Eleanore drew herself together and

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set her lips in the firm resolve still to treat her son with consideration. When she began to speak, her manner was calm and her voice low and quiet; yet in her eyes there gleamed a fire that was not born of patience. "So, Gerault! Doubtless all thou sayest is sooth to thee; yet I would tell thee this: when thou left'st her alone, I came upon her still sitting in the long room, leaning her head upon the table where thou hadst sat, weeping as if her heart was like to break. And when her sobs were still I brought her up to her room and caused her to remove her garments and to seek her bed, though all the while she shook with inward grief, till Alixe brought her a posset, and bathed her head in elder-flower water, and then, at last, she slept."

"And gave she no name to thee as cause for her malady?"

"Art thou indeed so ignorant of us? Or is it heartlessness? Wilt thou go to Rennes?"

"Hath she not required me to go? Good Heavens, madame! what wouldst have me do?" he answered with weary impatience.

"Gerault, Gerault, if I could by prayer or

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anger make thee to understand for one instant only! Ah, 't is the same tale that every woman has to tell. It was so with me. In my early youth I was brought from bright Laval, where I was a queen of gayety and life, to rule alone over this great Twilight Castle. Thy grandam was dead; and there was no other woman of my station here. In a few months after my home-coming as a bride, thy father rode away to join the army of Montfort in the East. From that time I saw my lord but a few weeks in every year; for the war lasted till I had reached the age of four-and-thirty. Thou camest to cheer my loneliness; and then, long after, Laure. And at last, when Laure was in her first babyhood, seventeen years ago, the long struggle ended at Auray; and then my lord, sore wounded in his last fight, came home. Alas! I was no happier for his coming. He had suffered much, and he was no longer young. We two, so long separated, were almost as strangers one to the other. Thou wast his great pride; dost remember how he loved to have thee near him? And many a time it cut me to the heart to hear the bloody, valorous tales he poured into thine

ears ; for I knew by them that he meant thee to do what he had done. It was not till he lay in his mortal sickness that we came back one to the other ; but he died in my arms, whispering to me such words as I had never had from him before. That last is a sweet memory, Gerault ; but the tale is none the less grievous of my young life here. And there is the more pity of it that mine is not the only story of such things. Many and many is the weary life led by some high-born lady in her castle, while her lord fights or jousts or drinks his life out in his own selfishness. Through those long years of the war of the Three Jeannes, I suffered not alone of women ; and how I suffered, thou canst never know. Do thou not likewise with thy frail Lenore. Stay with her here a little while, and make her life what it might be made with love."

Gerault listened in non-committal silence. When she finished he turned and faced her squarely : "Hast made this prate of my father and thee to Lenore ?" he asked severely.

"Gerault !" The exclamation escaped involuntarily ; when it was out Eleanore bit her lip and drew herself up haughtily. "Thou 'rt

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insolent," she said in a tone that she would have used to an inferior.

In that moment her son found something in her to admire, but the man and master in him was all alive. "Madame, we will waste no further words. I crave the honor to wish you a good night." And with a profound and ironical bow, he turned from the room, leaving Eleanore alone to the darkness, and to what was a defeat as bitter as any she had ever known.

Through the watches of the night this woman did not pray, but sat and meditated on the immense question that she had herself raised, and to which she had not the courage to give the true answer. Through her nearest and dearest she had learned the natures of men, knew full well their only aims and interest: prowess in arms, hunting, hawking, drinking, and, when they were weary, dalliance with their women. But was this *all*? Was this all there was for any woman in the mind of the man that loved her? The idea of rebellion against the scorn of men was not at all in her mind. She only wondered sadly how she and others of her sex came to be born so keenly sentient,

so open to heart-wounds as they were. And she divined that her question burned no less in the brain of the young Lenore than in her own, though neither of them ever spoke of it together. Nor did either make any round-about inquiries as to Gerault's intentions with regard to Rennes. Not so, however, the demoiselles of the Castle. Courtoise was under a hot fire of inquisition throughout most of the following two days; but for once he himself was uncertain of his lord's move, and presently there was a little air of joy creeping over the place in the shape of a hope that the Seigneur was going to remain in Crépuscule. This, indeed, was the secret idea of Courtoise; and only David the dwarf refused to entertain a suspicion that Gerault would not ride to Rennes for the tourney.

David judged well; for Gerault went to Rennes. Lenore knew on the tenth of the month that he would go. Madame remained in doubt till the day before the departure.

On the morning of the twelfth the whole Castle was astir by dawn. Gerault and his squire, bravely arrayed, came into the great hall at five o'clock, and sat down to their early

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meal. On the right hand of the Seigneur was Lenore, not eating, only looking about her on the fresh morning light, and again into Gerault's face. She was not under any stress of emotion. She was, rather, very dull and heavy-eyed. Yet down in her heart lay a smothered pain that she felt must come forth before long, in what form she could not tell. She and Gerault did not talk much together. There was a little strain between them that was none the less certain because it was indefinable, and it was a relief to the young wife when madame finally appeared. Lenore saw Eleanore's face with something of surprise. Never had it been so cold, so expressionless, so like a piece of chiselled marble; and looking upon her son, it grew yet harder, yet colder. But when madame, after some little parley with Courtoise, turned finally to Lenore, the child-wife found something in that face that came dangerously near to melting her apathy, and freeing the flood of grief that lay deep in her heart.

Half an hour later the knight and his squire were in the courtyard, where their horses stood ready for the mount. The little company of

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the Castle gathered close about their master, watching him as they might have watched some mythical god. Indeed, he was a brave sight, as he stood there in the early sunshine, flashing with armor, a gray plume floating from his helmet, and one of Lenore's small gloves fastened over his visor as a gage. Lenore beheld this with infinite, gentle pride, as she stood fixing his great lance in its socket. Presently two of the squires helped him to mount to the saddle; and when he was seated, he lifted Lenore up to him to give her good-bye. A few tears ran from her eyes, and rolled silently down his breastplate, on which they gleamed like clustered diamonds. But Lenore wiped them away with her hair, that they might not tarnish the metal of his trappings; and by that act, perhaps, Gerault lost a blessing.

The last kiss that he gave her was a long one, and his last words almost tender. Then, putting her to the ground again, he saluted his mother, though her coldness struck him to the heart; and, after a final farewell to the assembled company, he turned and gave the sign of departure to Courtoise.

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Spur struck flank. At the same instant, the two horses darted forward to the drawbridge, across which they had presently clattered. Alixe, who had been a silent spectator of the scene of departure, was standing near Lenore; and now she leaned over and would have whispered in the young wife's ear; but Lenore could not have heard her had she spoken. The child stood like a statue, blind to everything save to the blaze of passing armor, deaf to all but the echo of flying hoofs. Here she stood, in the centre of the courtyard, alone with her strange little life, watching the swift-running steed carry from her all her power of joy. With straining eyes she saw the two figures disappear down the long, winding hill; and when they had gone, and only a lazily rising dust-cloud remained to mark their path, she stayed there still. But presently Eleanore came to her side and took her cold hand in a hot pressure. And then, as the two bereft women looked into each other's eyes, the frozen grief melted at last, and the flood burst upon them in all its overwhelming fury.

CHAPTER NINE

THE STORM



FOR ten days after Gerault's departure, Lenore led a disastrous mental existence, which she expressed neither by words nor by deeds. In that time no one in the Castle knew how she was rent and torn with anguish, with yearning that had never been satisfied, and with useless regret for a bygone happiness that had not been happy. The silent progress of her grief led her into dark valleys of despair; yet none dreamed in what depths she wandered. She, the woman chaste and pure, dared not try to comprehend all that went on within her. She dared not picture to herself what it was she really longed for so bitterly. The cataclysms that rent her mind in twain were unholy things, and, had she been normal, she might have

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refused to acknowledge them. The changes in her life had come upon her with such overwhelming swiftness that she had hitherto had no time for analysis; and now that she found herself with a long leisure in which to think, the chaos of her mind seemed hopeless; she despaired of coming again into understanding with herself.

During all these days Madame Eleanore watched her closely, but to little purpose. The calm outward demeanor of the young woman baffled every suspicion of her inward state. Day after day Lenore sat at work in the whirring, noisy spinning-room, toiling upon her tapestry with a diligence and a persistent silence that defied encroachment. Hour after hour her eyes would rest upon the dim, blue sea; for that sea was the only thing that seemed to possess the power of stilling her inward rebellion. Forgetting how the winds could sometimes drive its sparkling surface into a furious stretch of tumbling waters, she dreamed of making her own spirit as placid and as quiet as the ocean. The thought was inarticulate; but it grew, even in the midst of her inward tumult, till in the end

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it brought her something of the quiet she so sorely needed.

By day and by night, through every hour, in every place, the figure of her husband was always before her. How unspeakably she wanted him, she herself could not have put into words. She knew well that he had promised to come back — “soon.” But when every hour is replete with hidden anguish, can a day be short? Can ten days be less than an eternity? a possible month of delay less than unutterable?

One little oasis Lenore found for herself in this waste of time. Every day she had been accustomed to pray upon her rosary, which was composed of sixty-two white beads. Now, when she had said her morning prayer, she tied a little red string above the first bead. On the second morning it was moved up over the second bead; and so the sacred chain became a still more sacred calendar. How many times did she halt in her prayers to find the thirtieth bead! and how her heart sank when she saw it still so very far from the little line of red!

At the end of the first week of the Seigneur's absence, it came to Madame Eleanore with a

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start that Lenore was growing paler and more wan. Then a suspicion of what the young wife was suffering came to the older woman, and she racked her brains to think of possible diversions for the forlorn girl. A hawking party was arranged, which Madame Eleanore herself led, on her good gray horse. And in this every one discovered with some surprise that Lenore could sit a horse as easily as the young squires, and that she managed her bird as well as any man. Alixe, who had always been the one woman in the Castle to make a practice of riding after the dogs, or with hawk on wrist, was filled with delight to find this unexpected companion for her sports; and she decided that henceforth Lenore should take the place of her old companion, Laure, in her life.

The hawking party accomplished part of its purpose, at least; for Lenore returned from the ride with some color in her face and a sparkle in her eyes. She was obliged, however, to take to her bed shortly after reaching the Castle, prostrated by a fatigue that was not natural. Madame hovered over her anxiously all through the night, though she slept more than in any night of late, and rose next morn-

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ing at the usual hour, much refreshed. That afternoon, when the work was through, madame saw no harm in her riding out with Alixe for an hour, to give a lesson to two young *muês* that were jessed and belled for the first time. And during this ride the young women made great strides in companionship.

What with new interest in an old pastime thus awakened, and a subject of common delight between her and Alixe, Lenore found the next nine days pass more quickly than the first. On the morning of the thirty-first of the month, however, Lenore had a serious fainting-spell in the spinning-room. She had been at work at her frame for an hour or more, when suddenly it seemed to her that a steel had pierced her heart, and she fell backward in her chair with a cry. The women hurried to her, and after some moments of chafing her hands and temples, and forcing cordials down her throat, she was brought back to consciousness. Her first words were: "Gerault! Gerault!" and then in a still fainter voice: "Save him, Courtoise! He falls!"

Thinking her out of her mind, madame carried her to her bedroom, and, admitting

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only Alixe with her, quickly undressed the slender body, and laid Lenore in the great bed. Presently she opened her blue eyes, and, looking up into madame's face, said, in a voice shaking with weakness, —

“It was a dream — a vision — a terrible vision! I saw Gerault— *killed!* My God!” she put her hands to the sides of her head, in the attitude that a terrified woman will take. “I saw him — Ah! But it is gone, now. It is gone. Tell me 't was a dream!”

Madame and Alixe soothed her, smoothing the hair back from her brow, patting her hands, and giving her all the comfort that they knew. Presently Lenore was calm again, and asked to rise. Madame, however, forbade this, insisting that she should keep to her bed all day; and through the afternoon either she or Alixe remained in the room, sewing, and talking fitfully with Lenore. The young wife, however, seemed inclined to silence. A shadow of melancholy had stolen upon her, and there was a cold clutch at her heart that she did not understand. Eleanore had her own theory in regard to the illness, and Alixe, whatever she might have noticed, had nothing to say about it.

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Next morning, the morning of the first of September, Lenore rose to go about her usual tasks, seeming no worse for the attack of the day before, except that her melancholy continued. Work in the spinning-room that day, however, was cut short on account of the heat, which was more oppressive than it had been at any time during the summer. Though the sky was clear and the sun red and luminous, the air was heavy with moisture ; the birds flew close to the ground ; spiders were busy spinning heavy webs ; worms and insects sought the underside of leaves ; and all things pointed to a coming storm. At noon two mendicant monks came to the Castle, asking dinner as alms ; and when the meal was over, they did not proceed upon their way. The bright blue of the sky was beginning to be obscured by fragments of gathering cloud, and in the infinite distance could be heard low and portentous murmurs. The sense of oppression and of apprehension that comes with the approach of any disturbance of nature was strong in the Castle. At four in the afternoon, madame had prayers said in the chapel, and there was a short mass for safety during the coming storm.

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After this service, Lenore, with Alixe and Roland de Bertaux, went out to walk upon the terrace that overlooked the water. The sight before them was impressive. The whole sea, from shore to far horizon, lay gray and glassy, flattened by the weight of air that overhung it, heavy and hot with moisture. The sun was gone, and the heart of the sky palpitated with purple. Flocks of gulls wheeled round the Castle towers, screaming, now and then, with some uneasy dread for their safety. The air grew more and more heavy, till one was obliged to breathe in gasps, and the sweat ran down the body like rain. The moments grew longer and quieter. The whole world seemed to stop moving ; and the birds, veering along the cliffs, moved not a feather of their wings.

After that it came. The sky, from zenith to water-line, was cut with a lightning sword, that hissed through the water-logged gray like molten gold. Then followed the cry of pain from the wound, — such a roar as might have come from the throats of all the hell-hounds at once. There was a quick second crash, while at the same instant a fire-ball dropped from

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heaven into the ocean, curdling the waters where it fell. Then, fury on fury, came the storm,—wind and rain and fiercer flashes, the line of the shower on the sea chased eastward by a toppling mass of rushing foam. With a scream the flock of gulls dashed out into the mist to meet it, and were seen no more; for now the world was black, and everything out of shelter was in a whirling chaos of spray and rain.

Inside the Castle holy candles had been lighted in every room, and beside them were placed manchets of blessed bread, considered to be of great efficacy in warding off lightning-strokes. The two monks, sincerely grateful for their shelter from this outburst, knelt together in the chapel, and called down upon themselves the frightened blessings of the company by praying incessantly, though their voices were inaudible in the tumult of the storm. The wind shrieked around the Castle towers. Flashes of white light, instantly followed by long rolls of thunder, succeeded each other with startling rapidity. And, as a fierce, indeterminate undertone to all other sounds, came the roaring of the sea, which an incom-

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ing tide was bringing every minute higher and closer around the base of the cliff below.

An hour went by, and yet another, and instead of diminishing in fury, the wind seemed only to increase. None in the Castle, not madame herself, could remember a summer storm of such duration. Every momentary lull brought after it a still more violent attack, and the longer it lasted, the greater grew the nervousness of the Castle inmates; for to them this meant the anger of God for the sins of His children. The evening meal was eaten amid repeated prayers for mercy and protection; and shortly thereafter, the little company dispersed and crept away to bed,—not because of any hope of sleep, but because there would be a certain comfort in crouching down in a warm shelter and drawing the blankets close overhead. The demoiselles, for the most part, and possibly the squires too, huddled two or three in a room. The monks were lodged together in the servants' quarters; and of all that castleful, only the women for whom it was kept were unafraid to be alone. Eleanore, Lenore, and Alixe sought each her bed; but of them madame only closed her eyes in sleep.

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Lenore found herself terribly restless ; and the foreboding in her mind seemed not all the effect of the storm. Her thoughts moved through terrifying shadows. It seemed to her that some great, unknown evil hung over her ; but her apprehension was as elusive as it was unreasonable. For some hours she forced herself to keep in bed, tossing and twisting about, but letting no sound escape her. It seemed at last as if the fury of the wind had diminished, though the lightning-flashes continued incessantly, and the whole sky was still alive with muttering thunder. A little after midnight, urged by a restlessness that she was powerless to control, Lenore rose, threw a loose blanket around her, took down the iron lantern that hung, dimly burning, on a hook in a corner of the room, and, lighting her way with this, went out into the silent upper hall of the Castle.

Gray and ghostly enough everything looked, in the dim, flickering lantern-light. There was in the air a smell of pitchy smoke from burnt-out torches, and it seemed to Lenore as if spirits were passing through this mist. Yet she felt no fear of anything in the spirit world.

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Her heart was full of something else,—a vague, indefinable, more terrible dread, an oppression that she could not reason away. Clad in her voluminous purple mantle, with her hair unbound and flowing over her shoulders, where it sparkled faintly in the lantern-light, she went down the stairs, across the shadowy, pillared spaces of the great lower hall, and so into the long room where Gerault had sat on the day when the herald had come to call him to Rennes. She had a vision of him sitting there at the table, bent upon his manuscript philosophy, never looking up, as again and again she passed the door. It was a ghostly hour for her to be abroad and occupied in such a way; yet she had no thought of present danger. A useless sob choked her as she turned away from this place of sorrowful memories and went to the chapel. Here half-a-dozen candles on the altar were still burning to the god of the storm; and Lenore, finding comfort in the sight of the cross, knelt before it and offered up a prayer for peace of mind. Then, rising, she moved back again into the hall; and, dreading to return to her lonely room, where the roar of waves and the

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soughing of the wind round the towers made a din too great for sleep, she sat down on a bench that stood beside a pillar directly opposite the great, locked door. Sitting here, her lantern at her feet, elbow on knee, chin on hand, she fell into a strange reverie. The bitterness of all memories came back to her without bitterness; and she tried to picture to herself that woman of Gerault's secret heart. What had she been? How had she died? Or was she dead? In what relation had she really stood to Gerault? Was she that cousin of Laval—or some other? These thoughts, which, always before, Lenore had refused to work into definite shape, came to her now and were not repelled. Her musing was deepest when, suddenly, she was startled by the sound of light footsteps in the hall above. Some one came to the staircase; some one came gliding sinuously down. Lenore half rose, and looked up, cold with fear. Then she saw that it was Alixe, and, strangely enough, her fear did not lessen; for never had she seen Alixe like this.

Lenore looked at her long before she was noticed; and the strangeness of the peasant-born's appearance did not lessen on close ex-

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amination. She was dressed in garments of pale green. And in these, and in her floating hair, her greenish eyes, her arms, her neck, Lenore fancied that she saw twists and coils and lissome curves and the green and golden fire of innumerable snakes. In the shadowy light everything was indistinct; but there seemed to be a phosphorescent glow about Alixe's garments that illumined her, till she stood out, the brightest thing in the surrounding darkness. Striving bravely to ward off her sense of creeping fear, Lenore raised her lantern high, and looked at the other, who had now reached the foot of the stairs. Yes — no — *was* this Alixe? Lenore took two or three frightened steps backward, and instantly Alixe turned toward her.

“Lenore! Thou!” she cried.

“Alixe!” Lenore stared, wondering at herself. Surely she had suffered a hallucination. Alixe was as ever, save that her eyes were a little wider, her skin a little paler, than usual.

“What dost thou here, at this hour, alone, Lenore? Did aught frighten thee?”

“I could not sleep, and so, long since, I rose, to wander about till the noise of the storm

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should fall. I have sat here for but a moment — thinking. But thou, Alixe, — whither goest thou? ”

“ I? I also could not sleep. The storm is in my blood. I turned and tossed and strove to lose my thoughts. But they burn forever. Alas! I am seared by them. My eyes refuse to close.”

“ What are those thoughts of thine, Alixe? Perchance they were of the same woof as mine.”

“ Nay, nay, Lenore! Thou hast no ancient memories of this place.”

“ That may be; yet my thoughts were of this place, and of a woman. Tell me, Alixe, hast thou known in thy life one of the same name as mine own: a maid whom — whom my lord knew well, and who hath gone far away? ”

“ Lenore! Mon Dieu! Who told thee of her? ”

“ It matters not. I know. Prithee, Alixe, talk to me of her, an thou wouldst still the torture of my soul! ”

“ What shall I tell thee, madame? ” Alixe stared at the young woman with slow, ques-

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tioning surprise. "Knowest thou of her life here among us? — or wouldst hear of her death?"

"Of all — of her life and death — tell me all!" Lenore drew her mantle close around her, for she was shivering with something that was not cold. She kept her head slightly bent, so that Alixe could not see the working of her face, as the two of them went together to the settle by the pillar.

Lenore sat very still, listening absently to the muffled sound of wind and rain and beating waves, while her mind drank in the narrative that Alixe poured into her ears; and so did the one thing interweave itself with the other in her consciousness, that, in after time, the spirit of the lost Lenore walked forever in her mind amid the terrible grandeur of a mighty storm, lightning crowning her head, her hair and garments dripping with rain and blown about by the increasing wind. An eerie thing it was for these two young and tender women, lightly clad, to sit at this midnight hour in the gray fastnesses of the Twilight Castle, and, while the whirlwind howled without, to turn over in their thoughts the story of a young

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life so tragically cut off in the midst of its happiness and beauty. Alixe's changeable eyes shone in the semi-darkness with a phosphorescent gleam, and her voice rose and fell and trembled with emotion as she poured into Lenore's burning heart the tale of Gerault's sorrow.

" Five years ago, when I was but a maid of twelve, Seigneur Gerault was of the age of twenty-three. At that time this Castle, I mind me, was a merry place enow. Madame Eleanore had a great train of squires and demoiselles in those days, and thy lord kept a young following of his own — though he held Courtoise ever the favorite. At that time Gerault rode not to tournaments in Rennes, but bided at home with madame, his mother, and Laure, and the young demoiselle Lenore de Laval, niece to madame, a maid as young as thou art now. This maiden had come to Crépuscule when she was but a little girl, her own mother being dead, and madame loving her as a daughter. Gerault's love for her was not that of a brother; yet because of their blood-relationship, there was little talk of their wedding. For all that, they two were ever

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together in company, and alone as much as madame permitted. They hawked, they hunted, and, above all, they sailed out on the sea. The Seigneur had a sailing-boat, and Madame Eleanore never knew, methinks, how many hours they spent on the waters of the bay. Child as I was, I envied them their happiness; and, though I went with them but seldom, I knew always how long they were together each day; and methinks I understood how precious each moment seemed.

“On this day I am to tell thee of — oh, Mother of God, that it would leave my memory! — I sat alone by the little gate in the wall behind the falconry, weeping because Laure had deserted our game and run to her mother in the Castle. So, while I sat there, wailing like the little fool I was, came the Seigneur and the demoiselle Lenore out by the gate on their way over the moat and to the beach by the steps that still lead thither down the cliff. The demoiselle paused in her going to comfort me, and presently, more, methinks, to tease the Seigneur than for mine own sake, insisted that I go sailing with them in their boat. I can remember how I screamed out with de-

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light at the thought ; for I loved to sail better than I loved to eat ; and though Gerault somewhat protested, Lenore had her way, and presently we had come down the cliff and were on the beach by the inlet where the boat was kept.

“ ’Twas the early afternoon of an April day : warm, the sun covered over with a gray mist that was like smoke, and but little wind for our pleasure. Howbeit, as we put off into the full tide, a breath caught our sail and we started out toward an island near the coast, round the north point of the bay, which from here thou canst not see. I lay down in the bottom of the boat, near to the mast, and listened to the gurgling sound of the water as it passed underneath the planks, and later grew drowsy with the rocking. I ween I slept ; for I remember naught of that sail till we were suddenly in the midst of a fog so thick that where I lay I could scarce see the figure of my lord sitting in the stern. There was no wind at all, for the sail flapped against the mast ; and I was a little frightened with the silence of everything ; so I rose and went to the demoiselle Lenore, who laid her hand on

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my shoulder, and patted me. She and Sieur Gerault were not talking together, for I think both were a little nervous of the fog. All at once, in the midst of the calm, a streak of wind caught us, and the little boat heeled over under it. Gerault caught at the tiller, swearing an oath that was born more from uneasiness than from anger. Reading his mind, Lenore moved a little out of his way, and began to sing. Ah, that voice and its sweetness! I mind it very well—and also her chansonette. Since that day I have not heard it sung, yet the words are fresh in my mind. Dost know it, madame? It beginneth,—

“ ‘ Assez i a reson porqoi
L’eu doit fâme chière tenir — ’

“ Ah, I remember it all so terribly! While Lenore sang, there came yet another gust of wind, and in it one of the ropes of the sail went loose, and the Seigneur must go to fix it. I sat between him and his lady, and as he jumped up, he put the tiller against my shoulder, and bade me not move till he came back. Lenore sat no more than four feet from me, on that side of the boat that was low in

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the wind. While she sang she had been playing with a ring that she had drawn from her finger. Just as monsieur sprang forward to the rope, Lenore dropped this ring, which methinks rolled into the water. I know that she gave a cry and threw herself far over the side and stretched out her hand for something. As she leaned, I followed her movement, and the tiller slipped its place. Ah, madame — madame — I remember not all the horror of the next moment! The boat went far over before a wave. Lenore lost her hold, and was in the water without a sound. The Seigneur, in a rage at me for letting the rudder slip, leaped back, and in an instant righted the boat, I screaming and crying, the while, in my woe. I know not how it was, but it seemed that, till we were started on our way again, Gerault never knew that — that his lady was gone.

“Then what a scene! We turned the boat into the wind, the Seigneur saying not one word, but sitting stiff and still and white as death in the stern. The path of the wind had made a long rift in the fog, and through this we sailed, I calling till my voice was gone, the Seigneur leaning over, straining his eyes into

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that fathomless mist that walled us in on both sides. After that he drew off his doublet and boots, and would have leaped into the waves, but that I — *I*, madame — held him from it. I caught him round the arms till we were both forced to the tiller again, and I cried and commanded and shrieked at him till I made him see that his madness would bring no help. I could not guide the boat alone in the storm, nor could he have saved Lenore from the power of the water.

“For hours and hours we sailed the bay. The wind drove the fog before it until the air was clear, and I think that the sight of that waste of tumbling seas was more cruel than the veiling mist from which we ever looked for Lenore to come back to us. Ah, I cannot picture that time to thee — or to myself. At last, madame, we went back to the Castle. We left her there, the glory of our Seigneur’s life, alone with the pitiless sea. It was I that had done it; that I knew in my heart. That I have always known, and shall never forget. Yet Gerault never spoke a word of blame to me. Mayhap he never knew how it came about. For many months thereafter he was

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as a man crazed ; and since that time he hath not been the same. All that long summer he stayed alone in his room, shut away from us all, seeing only Courtoise, who served him, and his mother, who gave him what comfort she could. Twice, too, he asked for me, and treated me with such kindness that it went near to breaking my heart. Ah, then it was that the Castle began to bear out its name ! It seems as if none had ever really lived here since that time.

“ But Lenore, thou wouldst say. We never saw her again ; though ’t is said that many weeks afterwards a woman’s body was cast up on the shore near St. Nazaire, and was burned there by the fisher-folk, as is their custom with those dead at sea. And they say that now, by night, her voice is heard to cry out along the shore near the inlet where Gerault’s boat once lay.

“ Many years are passed since these things happened ; yet they have not faded from my memory, nor have they from that of my lord. Up to the time of thy coming, madame, he mourned for her always ; nor did he abstain from asking forgiveness of Heaven for her end.”

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“ Ah, Alixe, he hath not yet ceased to mourn for her. Alas! I cannot fill her place for him. He is uncomforted. How sad, how terrible her end, within the very sight of him she loved! Tell me, Alixe, was she very fair?”

“ Not, methinks, so fair as thou, madame. Yet she was beautiful to look on, with her dark hair and her pale, clear skin, and her mouth redder than a rose in June. Her eyes were dark — like shadowy stars. And her ways were gentle — gay — tender — anything to fit her mood. Ah! I am wounding thee!”

Poor Lenore's head was bent a little farther down, and by her shoulders her companion knew that she wept. Alixe would have given much to bring some comfort for the pain she had unintentionally roused. But in the presence of the unhappy wife, she sat uneasy and abashed, powerless to bring solace to that tortured heart.

While the two sat there, in this silence, the storm, which had lulled a little, broke out afresh with such a flash and roar as caused even Alixe to cower back where she was. There was a fierce tumult of new rain and

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howling wind, and in the midst of it a sudden great clamoring at the Castle door, and the faint sound of a horse neighing outside. Alixe sprang up, and, thinking only of giving shelter to some storm-driven stranger, unbarred the door. As it flew open before the storm, a man was hurled into the room, in a furious gush of water ; and when the lantern-light fell upon his haggard face, Lenore gave a cry that was half a sob, and rushed upon him, clasping his arms, —

“Courtoise ! Courtoise ! How fares my lord ?”

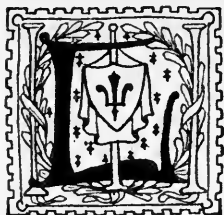
Courtoise gazed down upon her, and did not speak. In his face was such a look of suffering as none had ever seen before upon it.

“Courtoise !” she cried again, this time with a new note in her voice. “Courtoise ! — my lord ! — speak to me ! speak — how fares my lord ?”

But still, though she clung to him, Courtoise made no reply.

CHAPTER TEN

FROM RENNES



LENORE'S two hands went up in an agony of entreaty. Courtoise maintained his silence. There was in the great hall a stillness that the rushing of the storm could not affect. Alixe moved back to the door, and barred it once more against the attacks of the wind. At the same time another figure appeared on the stairs. Madame Eleanore, fully dressed, her hair bound round with a metal file, came rapidly down and joined the little group. Lenore was as one groping through a mist. She knew, vaguely, when madame came; but it meant nothing to her. Now she repeated, in the pleading tone of a child that begs for some sweet withheld from it by its elder, —

“Thou bringest a packet from my lord, Courtoise? Sweet Courtoise, deliver it to my hand. My lord sendeth me a letter, is it not so?”

A low cry, inarticulate, heart-broken, came from the lips of the esquire; and therewith he fell upon his knees before the young Lenore and held up his two hands as if to ward off from her the blow that he should deal. “Madame!” he said; and, for some reason, Lenore cowered before him.

Then Eleanore came up to them, her face milk-white, her eyes burning; and, laying her hand upon the young man’s shoulder, she said softly: “Speak, Courtoise! Tell us what is come to thy lord. In pity for us, delay no more.”

Courtoise looked up to her, and saw how deeply haggard her face seemed. Then the world grew great and black; and out of the surrounding darkness came his voice, “The Seigneur is dead. Lord Gerault is killed of a spear-thrust that he got in the lists at Rennes. They bear him homeward now.”

A deep groan, born of this, her final world-

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wound, came from Eleanore's gray lips. Alixe gave a long scream, and then fell forward upon her knees and began to mutter senseless words of prayer. Courtoise huddled himself up on the floor, and let fatigue and grief strive for the mastery over him. Only Lenore uttered no sound. She, the youngest of them there, and the most bereaved, stood perfectly still. One of her hands was pressed hard against her forehead; and she looked as if she were trying to recall some forgotten thing. Presently she whispered to herself a few indistinguishable words, and a faint smile hovered round her lips. Finally, seeing the piteous plight of Courtoise, she laid one hand upon his lowered head and said gently, —

“Courtoise, thou art weary, and wet, and spent with riding. Rise, dear squire, and seek thy bed, and rest. 'T is very late — and thou 'rt so weary. Go to thy rest.”

Eleanore looked at her, the frail girl, in amazement. Then she came round and took Lenore's hand, and said: “Thou sayest well; 't is very late, Lenore, and thou art also lightly clad. Come thou to thy bed, and let Alixe to hers. Come, my girl.”

Lenore made no resistance, and went with madame toward the stairs; Alixe stared after them as if they had both been mad, for she had never known a blow that stuns the brain. Lenore suffered herself to be led quietly up the stairs, and, reaching her own room, which was dark save for the light that came through from madame's open door, she dropped off her wide bliault, and lay down, shivering slightly, in the cold bed. She was numb and drowsy. Madame, bending over her, watched and saw the eyelids slowly close over her great blue eyes, till they were fast shut; and the young Lenore slept — slept as sweetly as a babe.

Of the night, however, that madame spent, who dares to speak in unexpressive words? What the slow-passing, dark-robed hours brought her, who shall say? Her last loss broke her spirit; and she felt that underneath the heavy, all-powerful hand of the Creator-Destroyer, none might stand upright and hope to live. Gerault had suffered, as now he gave, great sorrow. Eleanore had never felt herself close to his heart, as she had once been close to the heart of that daughter whom she had sacrificed to an unwilling God.

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But now, in the knowledge of his death, the memory of Gerault's coldness and of his elected solitude went from her, and she recalled only the justice, the strength, the self-reliance of him. Gradually her memory drew her back through his manhood, through his youth and his boyhood, to the time of his infancy, when the little, helpless, dark-eyed babe had come to bless the loneliness of her own young life. And with this memory, at last, came tears, — those divine tears that can wash the direst grief free of its bitterness.

As the dawn showed in the east, and rose triumphant over the dying storm, madame crept to her bed, and laid her weary body on the kindly resting-place, and slept.

At half-past six the sun lifted above the eastern hills, and looked forth from a clear, green sky, over a land freshly washed, glittering with dew, and new-colored with brighter green and gold and red for the glorification of the September day. The sea, bringing great breakers in from the pathless west, was spread with a carpet of high-rolling gold, designed to cover all the new-stolen treasures gathered by night and stored within its

treacherous, malignant depths. But the world poured fragrant incense to the sun, and the sun showered gold on the sea, and in this sacrificial worship Nature expiated her dire passion of the night.

It was fair daylight when Lenore opened her eyes and sat up in her bed to greet the morning. She was glad indeed to escape from the fetters of sleep, for her dreams had been feverish things. In them she had wandered abroad over the gray battlements, and through the grim chambers of dimly lighted Crépuscule, and had seen and heard terrible things. Lenore smiled to herself at the thought that all were past. And then, creeping over her, came the black shadow of reality, of memory. There was the storm — her sleeplessness — Alixe — the story of the lost Lenore — were these dreams? And then — finally — God ! — the coming of Courtoise — and —

With a sharp cry Lenore sprang from the bed, flung her purple mantle upon her, and ran wildly through the adjoining room into that of madame. Eleanore, roused from her light sleep by that cry, had risen and met her daughter near the door. Lenore needed

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but one glance into madame's colorless face. Then she knew that she had not dreamed in the past night. Her horrible visions were true.

Physical refreshment brought her a terrible power: the power of suffering. There could not now be any numb acceptance of facts. Eleanore herself was shocked at the change that a few seconds wrought in the young face. Yet still Lenore shed no tears, made no exhibition of her grief. Quietly, with the stillness of death about her movements, she returned to her room and began to dress herself. Before she had finished her toilet, Alixe crept in, white-faced and red-eyed, to ask if there were any service she might do. Lenore tremulously bade her wait till her hair was bound; and then she said: "Let Courtoise be brought in to me, here."

"Wilt thou not first eat — but a morsel of bread — nay, a sup of wine?" pleaded Alixe.

Lenore looked at her. "How should I eat or drink? Let Courtoise be brought to me."

Obediently Alixe went and found Courtoise loitering about the foot of the stairs in the

hall below. He ascended eagerly when Alixe gave him her message, and entered alone into the room where sat Lenore.

Through two long hours Alixe and the demoiselles and young esquires, a stricken, silent company, huddled together at the table in the long room, sat and waited the coming of Courtoise. There was nothing to be done in the Castle save to wait; and it seemed to them all that they would rather work like slaves than sit thus, inert and silent, and with naught to do but think of what had come upon *Le Crépuscule*. They knew that the body of Gerault was on its way home. A henchman had long since started off for St. Nazaire to acquaint the Bishop with the news and bring him back to the Castle. Also, Anselm and the captain of the keep had lifted the great stone in the floor of the chapel, that led into the vault below. This was all there was to be done now, until the last home-coming of their lord.

At ten o'clock Courtoise appeared on the threshold of the long room, and his face bore a light as of transfiguration. As he went in and halted near the doorway, the little com-

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pany rose reverently, and waited for him to speak. He turned to Alixe, but it was a moment or two before he could get his voice and control it to speak.

“Alixé — Alixe — Madame Lenore hath asked for you — asks that you come to her.”

Alixé rose at once, and the two went out together into the hall. There, however, Courtoise halted, saying, in a low, almost reverent tone: “She is in her chamber. I am to remain here below.”

Alixé turned her white face and her bright green eyes upon him questioningly. “How doth she bear herself? Doth she yet weep?” she asked in a half-whisper.

“She doth not weep. Ah, God! the Seigneur married an angel out of heaven, Alixe, and never knew it; and now can never know!”

“He was our lord, Courtoise. Reproach not the dead.”

Courtoise bent his head without speaking, and Alixe went on, up to Lenore’s chamber, the door of which stood half open. Alixe went softly in, and found Lenore sitting alone by the window, where madame had just left

her. Silently the widowed girl put out both hands to Alixe, and, as Alixe went over to her, the tears began to run from her eyes. It was this sight of tears that first broke through Lenore's wonderful self-control. Springing to her feet, with a choking, hysterical cry she flung both arms around Alixe's neck, and wailed out, in that breathless monotone that children sometimes use: "Alixé! Alixe! Why is it that I cannot die? O Alixe! Alixe! Pray God to let me die!"

At four o'clock in the afternoon Monseigneur de St. Nazaire arrived at the Castle. The body of the fallen knight had not yet come. Watchers had been placed in every tower to catch the first sight of the funeral train; but all day long they had strained their eyes in vain. At last, when the sun was near the horizon, and the golden shadows were long over the land, and the sky was haloed with a saintly glow, up, out of the cool depths of the forest, on the winding, barren road that rose toward the Castle on the cliff, came a wearily moving company of men and horses. There were six riders, who, with lances reversed, rode

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three on a side of a broad, heavy cart, of which the burden was covered with a great, black cloth, embroidered in one corner with the ducal arms of Brittany.

The drawbridge was already lowered. In the courtyard an orderly company of henchmen and servants stood waiting to see the funeral car drive in. The Castle doors were open, and in their space stood the Bishop, with a priest at his right hand and, on his left, Courtoise, black-clothed, and white and calm. In front of the doorway the cart halted, and immediately the six gentlemen of Rennes, who had drawn Gerault from the fatal lists and had of their own desire brought him home, dismounted, and, after reverently saluting the Bishop, went to the cart and lifted out the stretcher. This, its burden still covered with the black cloth, they carried into the Castle and deposited in the chapel on the high, black bier made ready for it.

Madame Eleanore, Alixe, and the demoiselles, but not Lenore, were in the chapel waiting. When the burden of the litter had been placed, and the black cloth drawn close over the dead body, Eleanore, who till this

time had been upon her knees before the altar, came forward to greet the six knightly gentlemen, and all of them, as they returned her sad salute, were struck with her impenetrable dignity. Her salutation at once thanked them, greeted them, and dismissed them from the chapel; and indeed they had no thought of staying to watch this first meeting of the living with the dead; but, returning obeisance to the mother of their comrade, they left the holy room and found Courtoise outside, waiting to conduct them to the refreshment that had been prepared.

So was Eleanore left alone before her dead. Behind her, near the altar, knelt the maidens, weeping while they prayed. The tall candles around the bier were yet unlighted; but through one of the high windows came a last ray of sunlight, to bar the mourning-cloth with royal gold.

For a moment, clasping both hands before her, in her silent strain, Eleanore stood still before the bier. Then, moving forward, she lifted the edge of the covering, and drew it away from the head and shoulders of her son.

There was he, — Gerault. There was he,

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scarcely whiter or more still than she had seen him many times in life; yet he was dead: transparent and pinched and ineffably still, and dead! The head was bare of any cap or helmet, and the black locks and beard were smoothly combed. The broad, fair brow was calm and unwrinkled. The mouth, scarce concealed by the mustache, was curved into an expression of great peace.

Madame took the cover again, and drew it slowly down till the whole form lay before her. His armor had been removed, and he was clothed in silken vestments that hid all trace of his wound. The hands were folded fair across his breast; his feet were cased in long velvet shoes, fur-bordered. From the peacefulness of his attitude it was difficult to imagine the scene by which he had met his end: the great flashing and clashing of arms, the blare of trumpets, the shouting applause of thousands of fair onlookers, gayly clothed ladies, who, after their shouting, saw him fall.

Long Eleanore stood there, looking upon him as he lay, untroubled now by any human thing. And as she looked, many world-thoughts rose up within her as to his life, his

griefs, and the manner of his going. She had had him always : had borne, and reared, and watched, and loved him ; and he had loved her, she knew, though he had seldom shown it, and had lived much within himself. She yearned — ah, *how* she yearned ! — to take him now into her arms again, and croon over him, and soothe him, as a mother soothes her children. Alas, that he did not need it of her ! Her breast heaved twice or thrice, with deep, suppressed sobs. Then she fell upon her knees, and leaned her forehead over upon an edge of his robe while she prayed. And as she knelt there, twilight gathered over the sunset glow, and the chapel grew dim and gray with coming darkness.

After a long while madame rose and turned to Alixe, who stood near, looking at her and weeping. And madame said gently : “ Alixe, let her be summoned — little Lenore — his wife. She should be here.”

Alixé bowed silently, and went away out of the room. Eleanore remained in her place, and the demoiselles still knelt under the crucifix. Then came footboys, with tapers, to light the candles. Presently the bier was

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haloed with yellow flames, and the marble altar blazed with lights. The hour for the mass was near, and the people of the Castle, and a few country folk, clothed in their best, began to come softly into the chapel, by twos and threes. All, after bowing to the cross and pausing for a few seconds to look upon Gerault, passed over to the far side of the room, and knelt there, absorbed in prayer. The little room was more than half filled, when Courtoise, pale and wide-eyed, appeared upon the threshold, and, holding up his hand, whispered to the throng, —

“Madame Lenore is here! Peace, and be still! Madame Lenore comes in!”

Immediately Lenore walked into the room, and men held their breath at sight of her. She was dressed as for a bridal, in robes of stiff, white damask, her mantle fastened at her throat with a silver pin, and her silver-woven wedding-veil falling over her from the filet that confined it. White as death itself she was, and staring straight before her, seeing nothing of the throng of onlookers. For a moment her eyes were blinded by the blaze of light. Then she started forward, to the body of her lord.

When she entered, her two hands had been tightly clenched, and she had thought to restrain herself from any outbreak of grief before the people. But the living were forgotten now. Here before her was the face that she had loved so wofully, that she had hungered for so unspeakably. Here was he, the giver of her one brief hour of unutterable happiness; the cause of so many days and nights of tremulous woe. Here he lay, waiting not for her nor for anything, with no power to give her greeting when she came. Yet it was he; it was his face.

“Gerault — Gerault — my lord!” she whispered softly, as if he slept: “Gerault!” She was beside him, and had taken one of the rigid hands in both her warm, living ones. “My lord, my beloved, wilt not turn thy face to me? I have waited long for thy kiss. Prithee, give but a little of thy love; *seem* but to notice me, and I will be well content. Nay, but thou surely wilt! Surely, surely, beloved, thou wilt not pass me by!”

She had been covering the hand she held with kisses, but now she put it from her, and looked down upon the passive body, her eyes

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wide and hurt, and her mouth tremulous with his repulse. The spectators watched this pitiable scene with fascinated awe; and it seemed not to occur to one of them to prevent what followed. None there realized that Lenore was unbalanced: that to her, Gerault was still alive. She bent over, and put her lips to his. Then, burned and tortured by the unresponsiveness of the clay, she laid herself down upon the bier and put her head in the hollow of Gerault's neck, where it had been wont to rest.

Now, at last, two of that watching company started forward to prevent a continuance of the scene. Courtoise and the Bishop went to her with one impulse; took her — monseigneur by the hands, Courtoise about the body; loosened her clasp upon the form of her dead husband, and drew her gently away from the bier. She, spent and shaken with her grief, made no resistance, but lay quietly back in their arms, trembling and weak. Thereupon both men looked helplessly toward Madame Eleanore, to know what should be done. She, strained almost to the point of breaking, came and stood over the form of Lenore and said to Courtoise, —



“GERAULT — Gerault — my
lord!” she whispered. — Page 275

“She cannot remain here. ’T is too terrible for her. Carry her up to her room, whither Alixe shall follow her. But I must remain here till the mass is said.”

Both of the men would gladly have acted upon this suggestion; but madame had not finished speaking when Lenore began to struggle in their arms, crying piteously the while:

“Nay! Let me stay! In the name of mercy, let me not be sent from him. I will not seek again to disturb his rest. I will be very quiet — very still. I will not even weep. I will but kneel here upon the stones, and will not speak through all the mass, so that you take me not out of his sight. Methinks he might care to have me here; it might be his wish that I should remain unto the end. Have pity, gentle Courtoise! Pity, monseigneur!”

At once they granted her request, and released her; for indeed her plea was more than any of the three could well endure. The Bishop was beyond speech, and the tears were streaming from Courtoise’s eyes as he left her side. Lenore kept her word. She knelt down upon the stones, two or three feet from the bier; and, with head bent low and hands

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clasped upon her breast, strove to force her thoughts to God and high heaven. St. Nazaire at once began the mass for the dead, and never had any man more reverence done him or more tears shed for him than the stern and silent Lord of Crépuscule, who, it seemed, had formed a light of life for Lenore the golden-haired. After the beginning of the service, she was left unnoticed where she had placed herself; and, as the minutes passed, her strained figure settled nearer and nearer to the floor; the candle-light played more joyously with her glorious hair; and finally, as the mass neared its end, she sank quietly down upon the stones, unconscious and released from tears at last.

A few moments later, Courtoise and Alixe bore her gently up the great stairs, and laid her, in her white bridal robes, upon her lonely bed. It was thus that she left Gerault; thus that her youth and her love met their end, and her long twilight of widowhood began.

Another morning dawned, in tender primrose tints, and saluted the sea through a low-clinging September haze. The Castle rose at the usual hour, and dressed, and descended to the morn-

ing meal, scarce able to understand that there was any change in the usual quiet existence. It was impossible, indeed, to realize that, in two little days of sun and storm, the life of the Castle had died, its mainstay had broken, and that henceforth it must exist only in memories. On this day two of the squires made their adieux to madame, and hied them forth to seek a lord by whom to be trained yet more thoroughly for knighthood ; and mayhap to get themselves a little more familiar with its third article.¹ But Courtoise, all heart-broken as he was, and Roland de St. Bertaux, and Guy le Trouvé, being all of gentle blood, but without other home to seek, came to their lady and kissed her hand, and swore her eternal allegiance and service. And the demoiselles, who had, indeed, no need of a lord in the Castle, renewed their duty to their mistress, and also tried to give her what little comfort they knew, in the shape of certain of Anselm's Latin texts, and a few less pithy but warmer phrases of their own making. The six knights that had brought Gerault home, rode off again, sadly bearing

¹ "He shall uphold the rights of the weaker, such as orphanse, damsels, and widows."

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with them Eleanore's brave messages of loyalty and thanks to Duke Jean in Rennes. The Bishop of St. Nazaire sent his assistant priest home ; but he himself elected to remain for a day or two, knowing that, should Lenore become seriously ill, he would be a stay for Madame Eleanore. Of Eleanore herself there were no fears. She was too strong to cause any one anxiety for her health. Indeed, it was generally thought that she had put Gerault too much away. How that may be is not certain ; but there was nothing now in the Castle to speak of him. The chapel was empty ; the mouth of the great vault had closed once more, this time to hide under its grim weight the last of the line of Crépuscule.

On the second day after the funeral, Eleanore, knowing by bitter experience how excellent a cure for melancholy is hard work, betook herself and the demoiselles up to the spinning-room as usual. Lenore only, of the company, was missing. She, by madame's own bidding, still kept her bed, — lying there silent, patient, asking no attendance from any one ; listening hour by hour to the soft sound of the sea as it broke upon the cliffs far below her window.

Of what was in her heart, what things she saw in her day dreams, neither Alixe nor madame sought to learn. But there was something in her face, thin, wan, transparent as it had grown, that sent a great fear to Eleanore's heart, and caused her to watch over Lenore with deep anxiety ; and it seemed as if the effort of walking would break the last vestige of strength in that frail body.

Through the first day of return to the old routine, madame was fully occupied in making a pretence at cheerfulness and in inducing those around her to hide their sadness. But afterwards, when chatter and smiles began to come naturally back to the young lips, and the gayety of youth to shine from their eyes again, she suddenly relaxed her strain, and let her mind sink into what depths it would. How dim with misery was the September air ! Hope had gone out of her life ; and the thought of joy was a mockery. Throughout her whole world there was not a single spot of brightness on which to feast her tired eyes. Even imagination had fled, and there remained to her only a vista of unending, monotonous days, the one so like the other that she should

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soon forget the passage of time. And this future was inevitable. *Le Crépuscule* was here, and she must keep to it. She had no other refuge save a nunnery; and that merest suggestion was terrible to her. Gerault's widow, the young Lenore, was left; yet she would be infinitely happier to go back to the home of her youth. There was a cry of despair in Eleanore's heart at this realization, and she fought with herself for a long time before finally she was wrought to the point of going to Lenore and counselling her return to her father's roof. Yet Eleanore brought herself to this; for she felt that this last sacrifice was one of duty: that she had no right forever to shut the youth and beauty of the young life into the grim shadows of *Le Crépuscule*.

On the evening of the third day of her new struggle Eleanore went, with woe in her heart, to the door of Lenore's room. The apartment was flooded with the light of sunset, so that Lenore, lying in the very midst of it, seemed to be resting in a sea of glowing gold. When Eleanore entered, the young girl turned, with a little smile of pleasure, and said, —

“Thou’rt very kind to come to me here while I lie thus in idlesse. Indeed, I see not how thou shouldst bear with me that I do nothing when all the Castle is at work.”

“Bear with thee ! My child, thou hast given us nothing to bear. Thou hast rather brought into the Castle a light that will burn always in our hearts. And, in thy great grief, thou shalt get what comfort may be for thee from whatever thou canst find. Now, indeed, dear child, I am come to make a pleading that breaketh my heart ; yet we have done so much wrong to thy fair young life, that it is not in me further to blight it.” She went over to the bedside, and Lenore, sitting up, took one of the strong white hands in her own delicate fingers and pressed it to her lips. Then, while Eleanore bent close over her, she said softly,—

“What is this thing that pains thee ? Surely thou’lt not think that I could do aught to hurt thee ?”

“Yes, for this will bring happiness back into thy heart.”

“Happiness !”

“Yes, Lenore, happiness. That word

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sounds strange in thine ears from me; yet listen while I speak. Gerault, my dead son, brought thee out of a life of sunshine and gayety and fair youth into this grim Twilight Castle; and now thou hast entered, with all of us, from twilight into blackest night. But thou hast in thee what is lacking in me, and in those that dwell here as part of our race; thou'rt young, and thou hast had a joyous youth. Thou knowest what I long since forgot: that, in this world, there is a country of happiness. Now it is I, Gerault's mother, that bids thee leave these shades of ours and return to thy real home. I bid thee go back again into thy youth, to thy father's house, whither, if thou wilt, I will myself in all love convey thee; and I will tell thy father how thou hast been unto me all that—more than—a daughter should be; that I love thee as one of my own blood; that I am sore to give thee up—”

“Madame! Madame Eleanore! Thou must not give me up! Surely thou wilt not!” Lenore turned a quivering face up to the other; and madame read her expression with deep amazement.

“Give thee up! Do I not tell thee that at the thought my heart is like to break? Nay, thou’rt my daughter always; and when thou wilt, this is thy home. Yet for the sake of thy youth —”

“Madame —” Lenore sat up straighter, and looked suddenly off to the windows of her room, her face by turns gone deathly white and rosy red: “madame, this Twilight Castle is my double home. Here dwelt Gerault, my beloved lord, and — and here shall dwell his child — the child that is to be born to me — the new Lord of Le Crépuscule.”

“Lenore! — Lenore!”

“My mother!”

Then, as the sunset died from the distant west, these two women, united as never before, sat together upon Gerault’s bed, clasping each other close and mingling their tears and their laughter in a joy that neither had thought to know again.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE WANDERER



HE utterly unexpected revelation that Lenore had made to madame drew the two women into a tender intimacy that brought a holy joy to both of them. That most beautiful, most priceless flowering of Lenore's life gave to her nature an added sweetness, and to her soul a new depth that rendered her incomparably beautiful in the eyes of every one around her. The secret remained a secret between her and her new-made mother, and for this reason the happiness of the two was as inexplicable as it was joyous for the rest of the Castle. Alixe, standing jealously without the gate of this golden citadel, into which she had frequent glimpses, wondered at its brightness as much as she

wondered at its existence at all. Day by day Lenore grew beautiful, and day by day the look of content upon her face became more marked, until it was marvelled at how she had forgotten her bereavement. And Eleanore — Madame Eleanore — found herself growing young again in the youth of Gerault's bride; and in her love for the beautiful, tranquil girl she learned a lesson in patience that fifty years of trial and sorrow had never brought her.

When Lenore finally rose from her bed she did not return to the mornings in the spinning-room; and, since madame must perforce be there to oversee the work, Alixe took her frame or her wheel to Lenore's chamber, and sat there through the morning hours. Save for the fact that Alixe could not be addressed on the subject nearest her heart, Lenore probably enjoyed these periods of the younger woman's company quite as much as those graver times with madame. Both of them were young, and Alixe, having a nature the individuality of which nothing could suppress, knew more of the gayeties of youth than one could have thought possible, considering her opportunities. This jumped well with

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Lenore's disposition, for her own sunny nature would have shone through any cloud-thickness, provided there was some one to catch the beam and reflect it back to her. The two talked on every conceivable subject, but generally reverted to one common interest before many hours had gone. This was Nature: of which Lenore had been vaguely, but none the less passionately fond; and of which Alixe, in her lonely life, had made a beautiful and minute study. The two of them together watched the death of the summer, and saw autumn weave its full woof, from the rich colors of golden harvest and purple vine to the melancholy brown and gray of dead moorland and leafless branch. And when the dreariness of November came upon the land, there remained, to their keen eyes, the sea — the sea that is never twice the same — the sea whose beauties cannot die.

This sea, which Lenore had never looked on till she came a bride to Crépuscule, held for her a deep fascination. She watched it as an astronomer watches his stars. And its vasty, changing surface came to exercise a peculiar influence over her quiet life. The

night of the great storm brought it into double conjunction with the bitterest grief in her life; and, with the knowledge of its cruel power, awe was added to her interest and her admiration. She and Alixe were accustomed to talk daily of the lost Lenore, Lenore herself always introducing the topic with irresistible eagerness, and Alixe answering her innumerable questions with an interest born of curiosity regarding the young widow's motive. In the presence of Alixe, Lenore never betrayed the tiniest tremor of sensitiveness; and it would have been impossible for Alixe to surmise how keen was the secret bitterness that lay hidden in her heart. What suffering it brought she endured alone, by night, and indeed she kept herself for the most part well shielded from it.

From the first night after Gerault's burial, Lenore had insisted upon sleeping alone. To every suggestion of company she replied that solitude was precious to her, and that she could not sleep with another in the room. Eleanore understood her feeling, and, while she left an easy access from her room to Lenore's, never once ventured to enter Lenore's cham-

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ber after nightfall. For this, indeed, the young woman was grateful, not because of any joy she found in being alone in the darkness, but because, after she had gone to bed, she felt that her veil of appearances had fallen, and that she might let her mind take what temper it would. It was by night that she knew the terrible yearning for the dead that all women have in time, and from which they suffer keenest agony. It was by night that she pictured Gerault not as he had been, but as she had wished him to be toward her; and gradually Gerault dead came to be vested with every perfect quality, till her loss became endurable to her through the hours of her dreaming. By night, also, her childhood returned to her; and she recalled and gently regretted all the simple pleasures she had known, the rides and games and caroles that she had been wont to indulge in, in her father's house. Sometimes, too, in hours of distorted vision, she came to feel that her great blessing was rather a burden; and she would weep at the thought of the little thing that must be born to the interminable shadows of this grim Castle, and felt that she alone would be responsible

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for the sadness of the young life. Yet there might be fair things devised for him. It could not be but a boy,—her child; and in his early youth she planned that he should ride to some distant, gay chateau, to be esquired to a gallant knight; and in time he should come riding home to her, himself golden-spurred; and then, later, he should bring a lady to the Castle whom he should love as a man loves once; and the two of them would bring the light of the sun to Crépuscule, and banish its shadows forever away. So dreamed Lenore for this unborn babe of hers.

And then again, sometimes, by night, she would leave her bed and sit for hours together at that window where, long ago, Gerault had knelt in the hour of his passion. And Lenore would watch the quiet moon sail serenely through the sky, till it sank, at early dawn, under the other sea. And this vision of the setting moon never failed to bring peace to her heart. Sometimes, after Gerault's example, but not in his tone, she would call down from her height upon the spirit of the lost Lenore that was supposed to walk the rocky

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shore at the base of the Castle cliff. But no answering cry ever reached her ears, and this was well; for what such a thing would have brought to her already morbid mind, it were sad to surmise. Nevertheless, in the nights thus spent, this gentle ghost came to have a personality for her, in which she rather rejoiced, for she felt that here must be some one in whom she could expect understanding of her secret grief. Lenore at night, living with the creatures of her fancy, was a strange little being, no more resembling the Lenore of daylight than a gnome resembles some bright fairy. And so well did she hide her midnight moods that no one in the Castle ever so much as suspected them.

It was not till the middle of November that Alixe learned of the hope of Crépuscule; but when she did know, her tenderness for Lenore became something beautiful to see, and she partook both of Eleanore's deep joy and of Lenore's quiet content. Three or four days after the knowledge had come to her, Alixe was pacing up and down the terrace in front of the Castle, side by side with Lenore. It was a blustering, chilly day, and both young

women drew their heavy mantles close around them as they watched the great flocks of gulls wheel and dip to the sea, looking like flurries of snowflakes against the sombre background of the sky. Far out in the bay one or two of the crude fishing-boats from St. Nazaire were beating their way southward toward their harbor, and then Lenore watched with eyes that dilated more and more with interest and desire.

“Alixé,” she said suddenly, “canst thou sail a boat?”

“Why dost thou ask?”

“Certes, for that I would know.”

Alixé laughed. “’T is a reason,” she said.

“Tell me, Alixé! Make me answer!”

“Knowest thou not that, after the drowning of the demoiselle Lenore, it was forbidden any one in Crépuscule to put out upon the sea in any boat, though he might be able to walk the water like Our Lord?”

“Hush, Alixé! But yet — thou’st not replied to me.”

“Well, then, if thou wouldst know, I can sail a boat, and withal skilfully. In the olden days, Laure — ’t was Gerault’s sister — and I

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have gone out in secret an hundred times in a fisherman's boat anchored a mile down the shore, in front of some of the peasants' huts. Laure and I paid the fisherman money to let us take the boat; for she loved it as well as I. Indeed, I have been lonely for it since her going."

"Ah! Since her going thou'st not known the sea?"

"Not often. Alone, with a heavy boat, there is danger."

"Alixé, take me with thee sometime! Soon! To-day! My soul is athirst to feel the tremor of the boiling waves!"

"Madame!" murmured Alixé, not relishing what she considered an ill-advised jest.

"Nay! Look not like that upon me! I would truly go. Can we not set forth? There is yet time ere dark."

From sheer nervousness Alixé laughed. Then she said solemnly: "Madame Lenore, right willingly, hadst thou need of it, I would yield up my life to you; but venture forth with you upon those waters will I not; nor thou nor any other that were not mad, would ask it."

Lenore frowned at these words, but she

said nothing more, either on that subject or another; and presently the two went back into the Castle. But a strange desire had been born in Lenore, and she brooded upon it continually. Day by day she hungered for the sea; and, though she did not again suggest her wish, there were times when the roar of the waves on the cliffs, and the cold puffs of air strong with the odor of the salt tide, came near unbalancing her mind, and drove uncanny thoughts of watery deaths through her heart. But through that long winter she betrayed only occasional evidences of the effect that illness, loneliness, and long brooding were having upon her mind; and perhaps it was only the dread of betrayal that in the end saved her from actual insanity.

December came in and advanced in the midst of arctic gales and continually swirling snow, till Brittany was wrapped deep under a pure, fleecy blanket. It was the season of warmth and idleness indoors, when the poorest peasant got out his chestnut-bag, and merrily roasted this staple article of his diet before the fire by night. The Christmas spirit was on all men; and this in Brittany was tempered and tintured with the

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quaintest fairy-lore relating to the season, and as real to every Breton as the story of their Christ. The Christmas mass was no more devoutly enjoyed than was the great feast, held a week later, on the night known throughout Brittany not as the New Year, but as St. Sylvester's Eve, when all elfdom was abroad to guard the treasures left uncovered by the thirsty dolmens. And this, and an infinite number of other tales, of witch and gnome, sprite and fay, sleeping princess and hero-king, of Viviane and her wondrous forest of Broecilande, were told anew, each year, behind locked doors, before the crackling fires that burned from dusk to enchanted midnight.

To Lenore, the holy week from Christmas to New Year's was replete with interest; for in her own home, near Rennes, she had known nothing like it. Christmas morning saw all the peasantry of the estates of Crépuscule come to the Castle for mass; after which there was a great distribution of alms.

From Christmas Day, throughout that week, according to ecclesiastic law, the Castle draw-bridge was never raised; no watchers were

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posted on the battlements, and monk and knight, outlaw and criminal, high lord and lady, found welcome and food and shelter within the great gray walls. This open hospitality was made safe by the fact that, during this time, no matter what war might be in progress, or what family feud in height, no man was allowed to lift a hand against his neighbor, and the knight that dared to use his sword during those seven days was branded caitiff throughout his life. This law prevailed throughout the length and breadth of France; but its observance belonged more peculiarly to the far coast regions, where towns were scarce, and feudal fortresses offered the only hope of shelter to the traveller. And during this week there was scarcely an hour in the day that did not see its wanderer, of whatever degree, appealing for safe housing from the bitter cold.

The week was the merriest and the busiest that Lenore had known since coming to the Castle; and the arrival of the Bishop of St. Nazaire, on the day before New Year's, brought all *Le Crépuscule* to the highest state of satisfaction. For many years it had been mon-

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seigneur's custom to spend St. Sylvester's Day in the Castle, — formerly as the guest of the old Seigneur, latterly as that of Madame Eleanore; and though the Twilight Castle always delighted to honor his coming, on such occasions it was a double pleasure; for upon this one day he carried with him a spirit of bonhomie, of general, rollicking gayety, that roused every one to the same pitch of happiness, and made the Saint's feast what it was.

Since the last home-coming of Gerault, St. Nazaire had spent a good deal of time at the Castle, had played many a well-fought game of chess with Madame Eleanore, and had exerted himself to lift little Lenore, for whom he entertained almost a veneration, out of her quiet melancholy. None in the Castle, from Alixe to the scullions, but would have done him any service; and his arrival assured the feast of something of its one-time merriment.

On this great day the time for midday meat was set forward two hours, it being just one o'clock when the company sat down at the immense horseshoe table, that nearly encircled the great hall; for the ordinary Castle retinue was increased by a rabble of peasants, and a

dozen or more of travellers that had claimed their privilege of hospitality.

As Madame Eleanore, handed by the Bishop, took her place at the head of the table, the band of musicians in the stone gallery overhead sent out a noisy blast of trumpets, and everybody sought a place. Beside madame, supported by Courtoise, came Lenore; and again by her were Alixe, with Anselm the steward. When these were all standing behind their tabourets, monseigneur repeated the grace, in Latin. Immediately upon the amen, the trumpets rang out again, and there was a great rustling as everybody sat down and, in the same breath, began to talk. After a wait of not less than ten seconds, there appeared four pages, bearing high in their hands four huge platters, on each of which reposed a stuffed boar's head, steaming fragrantly. Two more boys followed these first, carrying immense baskets of bread, — white to go above the salt, black for those below. Then came Grichot, the cellarer, rolling into the room a cask of beer, which was set up in the space between the two ends of the curved table, and tapped. Instantly this was surrounded by a throng of

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struggling henchmen, friars, and peasants, each with his horn in his hand, eager to be among the first to drink allegiance to their lady. Madame and her little party in the centre of the table were served with wine of every description known to the north; besides mead or punches for whosoever should call for them.

Lenore was seated between Courtoise and monseigneur; and for her alone of all the company, apparently, the feast held less of merriment than of sadness. When every one was seated, and the clatter of tongues had begun, she looked about her, vaguely wondering how many times she should, by this feast, measure a year passed in the grim Castle. Looking along the table either way, at the double rows of men and women, Lenore saw every mouth working greedily upon food already served, and every hand outstretched for more, as rapidly as the various dishes could be brought in. She saw burly men, roaring with the laughter of animal satisfaction, drinking down flagon after flagon of bitter beer. She caught echoes and fragments of coarse jokes and coarser suggestions; and her

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delicate nature revolted at the scene. She turned to look toward the mistress of the Castle, wondering how madame, who was of a fibre as fine as her own, could endure such sights and sounds. Eleanore sat calmly listening to monseigneur, her eyes lifted a little above the level of the scene, her lips smiling, her air pleasantly animated, though she was scarcely eating, and only a cup of milk stood before her place. As for the Bishop, he was unfeignedly enjoying himself. A generous portion of roast peacock was on his plate, and a bottle of red wine stood close at his elbow. His wit was at its best, and he was entertaining all his immediate neighborhood with such stories and reminiscences as he alone could relate. Lenore found relief in the sight of him and madame, and, pulling herself together, turned to the young squire on her right hand, and began to talk to him gently. Roland listened to her with the reverent adoration entertained for her by every man about the Castle; but his replies were a little inadequate, and presently Lenore was again sitting silent, her burning eyes staring straight in front of her, her white face, framed in its shining hair,

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looking very set, her white robes gleaming frostily in the candle-light, her whole bearing stiffly unapproachable. She was nervous and uneasy, and she longed intensely to escape to her own quiet room. But there was madame talking serenely on, apparently unconscious of the gluttony around her; there was Alixe the Scornful, merrily jesting with Anselm, who had forgotten his frowns and his Latin together. Here was a great company of varied people, variously making merry, among whom there was not one that could have understood or excused her displeasure with the scene. Therefore she was fain to sit on, disconsolate, enduring as best she might her weariness and her contempt.

“En passant!” cried the Bishop, presently, “where is David le petit? Is the dwarf lying sick?”

“Why, indeed, I do not know,” answered Eleanore, looking around her. “David! Is David not among us?” she cried.

At this moment there was a commotion at one end of the room, and presently the table began to shake. Dishes and flagons clattered together, and a little ripple of laughter rose and

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flowed along from mouth to mouth, following the progress of David himself, who was darting rapidly down the table, picking his way easily between clumps of holly and tall candles, and dishes and plates and flagons, as he moved around toward Madame Eleanore and her little party. His costume added materially to the effect of his appearance, for he was dressed like an elf, in scarlet hose, pointed brown shoes, tight jerkin of brown slashed with red, and peaked, parti-colored cap. In this garb his tiny figure showed off straight and slender, and his ruddy face and glittering eyes gave him proper animation for the role he had chosen to play.

Flying down the table till he came to a halt in front of madame and the Bishop, he jerked the cap from his head, whirled lightly round on his toes, twice or thrice, and then, with a quaint gesture of introduction, he sang, in a sing-song tone, these verses : —

“ From elf-land I —
Gnome or troll —
Leaped from the cave
Whence dolmens roll
Down from on high
To the tumbling wave !

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“In darkness I live ;
In darkness I love.
Yet there 's one thing
To mortals I give.
From treasure-trove
Jewels I bring !”

With the last words he drew, from a fat pouch at his side, a handful of bright bits of quartz-crystal, and, tossing them high in the air, let them fall over him and down upon the table in a glittering shower. There was a quick scramble for them ; and then, with an uncanny laugh, David pirouetted down the table, backward, guiding himself miraculously among the articles that loaded the board, flinging about him, at every other step, more of his “jewels,” and now and then singing more extemporaneous verses concerning his mysterious country. All the table paused in its eating and drinking to watch him, for, when he chose, he was a remarkably clever and magnetic actor. To-day he was making an unusual effort, and presently even Lenore leaned forward a little to catch his words ; and, in a swift glance, he perceived that some color had come into her cheeks, and a faint light into her eyes.

It made a pleasant interlude in the feasting ; and when at length the little man, with a hop and a spring, left the table, and came round to the place where he was accustomed to sit, he was followed by a burst of enthusiastic applause.

The gayety that he had excited by his rhymes and his pebble shower did not die away for some time. By now, however, the eating was at an end, and a lighter tone of conversation spread through the room, as the footboys brought in two extra casks of beer and some dozens of bottles of red wine. This was the wished-for stage of the day's entertainment, and if there was any one present that should be unminded for what was to come, this was the signal for departure. Madame Lenore was the only one in the room to go ; but she rose the moment that the table had been cleared of food, and, with a slight bow to madame and monseigneur, slipped quietly to the stairs and passed up to her room with a relief in her heart that the day was over.

The last white fold of Lenore's drapery had scarcely disappeared round the bend in the

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stairway, when there came a knocking upon the outer door of the great hall, which was presently thrust open, before one of the henchmen could reach it, to let in a beggar from the bitter cold outside. It was the last day of the week of hospitality, and perhaps this wanderer was the more readily admitted for that fact. It was a woman, ragged, unkempt, and purple with cold. Madame Eleanore just glanced at her, and then signed to those at the lower end of the table to give her place with them, and bring her food. But the new-comer seemed not to notice the invitations of those near by. She stood still, gazing intently toward Madame Eleanore, till presently one of the henchmen, somewhat affected with liquor, sprang from his place with the intention of pulling her to a seat. In this act he got a view of her face with the light from a torch falling full across it. Instantly he started back with a loud exclamation, —

“Mademoiselle!”

Then all at once the woman, holding out both her arms toward madame’s chair, swayed forward to her knees with a low wailing cry that brought the whole company to their feet.

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There was one moment of terrible silence, and then a woman's scream rang through the room, as Madame Eleanore staggered to her feet and started forward to the side of the wanderer.

“Laure! Laure! O God! my Laure!”

As the two women — madame now on her knees beside her daughter — intertwined their arms, and the older woman felt again the living flesh of her flesh, the throng at the table moved slowly together and drew closer and closer to these central figures. Nearest of all stood Alixe and Courtoise, white-faced, tremulous, but with great joy written in their eyes. They had recognized Laure simultaneously an instant before madame, but they had restrained themselves from rushing upon her, leaving the first place to the mother.

Eleanore was fondling Laure in her arms, murmuring over her inarticulate things, while tears streamed from her eyes, and her strained throat palpitated with sobs. What Laure did or felt, none knew. She lay back, half-fainting, in the warm clasp; but presently she struggled a little away, and sat straight. Pushing the tangled hair out of her eyes, — those black,

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brilliant eyes that were still undimmed, — and seeing the universal gaze upon her, she shrank within herself, and whispered to her mother: “In the name of God, madame, I prithee let me be alone with thee!”

Then Eleanore bethought herself, and rose, lifting Laure also to her feet. For a moment she looked about her, and then with a mere lifting of her hand dispersed the crowd. They melted away like snow in rain, till only three were left there in the great hall: Courtoise, Alixe, and lastly monseigneur, who during the whole scene had stood apart from the throng, the law of excommunication heavy upon him. Forbid a mother, starved by nearly a year of denial of her child, to satisfy herself now that that child was at last returned to her? Not he, the man of flesh and blood and human passions!

Madame stood still for an instant in the centre of the disordered room, supporting Laure with one arm. Then she turned to Alixe.

“Go thou, Alixe, and get food, — milk, and meat, and bread, — and bring it in the space of a few moments to my room. But let

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no other seek to disturb us in our solitude. Now, my girl!"

Madame led her daughter across the hall and up the stairs, and to the door of her bedroom, into which Laure passed first. Madame followed her in, and closed and fastened the door after her. Then she turned to her child.

At last they were alone, where no human eyes could perceive them, no human ear hear what words they spoke. And now Eleanore's arms dropped to her sides, and she stood a little off, face to face with Laure. With Laure? Yes, it was she,—there could be but one woman like her,—with her tall, lithe, straight form, terribly wasted now by hardship and suffering: with those firm features, and the unrivalled hair that hung, brown and unkempt, to her knees. And again, it was not the Laure that the mother had known. In her eyes—the great, doubting, haunted, shifting eyes—lay plainly written the story of the iron that had entered into her soul. And there was that in her manner, in her bearing, that something of defiant recklessness, that pierced her mother like a knife.

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It was not the rags and the dirt of her body ; it was the rags and dirt of her defiled soul.

The girl looked straight before her into space ; but she saw her mother's head suddenly lowered, and she saw her mother's hands go up before her face.

Then came Alixe's knock at the door ; and Laure went and opened it, took in the food, set it down on the bed, shut and fastened the door again, and returned to her mother, who was sitting now beside the shuttered window, her head lying on her arms, which rested on a table in front of her.

There was a silence. Laure's hand crept up to her throat and held it tight, to keep the strain of repressed sobs from bursting her very flesh. Her eyes roved round the old, familiar, twilight room ; but just now she did not see. Her brain was reeling under its weight of agonized weariness. What was she to say or do ? What was there for her here ? Her mother sat yonder, bent under the weight of her sin. Was there any excuse for her to make ? Should she try to give reasons ? Worst of all, should she ask forgiveness ? Never ! Laure had the pride of despair left

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in her still. She had come home dreaming that the gates of heaven might still be open to her. She found them barred; and the password she could not speak. Hell alone, it seemed, remained.

"Madame," she said in a hard, quiet voice, "I have come wrongfully home, thinking thou couldst give me succor here. But I perceive that I do but pain thee. I will go forth again. 'T is all I ask."

At the mere suggestion that Laure should go again, madame's heart melted and ran in tears within her. "Ah, Laure! my baby — my girl — thou couldst not leave me again?" she cried in a kind of wail.

"Mother! First of all, I came to thee!" said the girl, in a whisper that was very near a sob.

But, unexpectedly, Eleanore rose again, with a gleam of anger coming anew into her eyes. "Nay; thou didst *not* first of all come to me! If thou hadst — if thou hadst — ere thou wast stolen away by the cowardly dastard that hath ruined thee —!"

Laure trembled violently, and her voice was faint with pleading: "Speak no ill of him,

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madame! I was not stolen away. Freely, willingly, I went with him. Freely—" she drew herself up and held her head high—"freely and willingly, though with the curse of Heaven on my head, would I go with him still, were it in the same way!"

"God of God! why hast thou left him, then?"

A black shadow spread itself out before Laure's eyes, and in her unpitied wilderness her woman's soul reeled, blindly. Her voice shook and her body grew rigid, as she answered: "I — did not — leave him."

"He is dead?" Eleanore's tone was softer.

"No; he is not dead!" Laure's face contorted terribly, as there suddenly rushed over her the memory of the last three months; and as it swept upon her, she sank to her knees, and held out her hands again in supplication: "Ah, pity me! pity me! As thou'rt a woman, pity me, and ask me not what's gone! I loved him. God in Heaven! How did I love him! And he hath gone from me. Mine no more, he left me to wander over the face of the earth. He left me to weep and mourn through all the years of mine

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empty life. Flammeccœur! Flammeccœur! How wast thou dearer than God! more merciless than Him." Here her words became so rapid and so incoherent that all meaning was lost, and the deserted woman, exhausted, overcome with her torn emotions, presently fell heavily forward to the floor, in a faint.

In this scene Eleanore had forgotten every scruple, every resentment, everything save her own motherhood and Laure's need. Putting aside all thought of the girl's shame, her abandonment, her rejection, she went to her and lifted her up in her strong and tender arms, and, with the art known only to the big-souled women of her type, poured comfort upon the bruised and broken body of the wanderer, and words of cheer and encouragement into her more cruelly bruised and broken mind. In a few moments Laure had recovered consciousness, had grown calm, and was weeping quietly in her mother's arms.

Then madame began to make her fit for the Castle again. She took off the soiled and ragged garments, that hung upon the skin and bone of her wasted body. She bathed the poor flesh with hot water, and with her own

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tears. She combed and coiled the wonderful, tangled hair. And lastly, wrapping her, for warmth, in a huge woollen mantle, she led Laure over to her bed, drew back the heavy curtains, and laid the weary woman-child in it, to rest.

When Laure felt this soft comfort; when she realized where, indeed, she was and who was bending over her; when she knew what land of love and of tenderness she had finally reached after her months of anguished wandering,—it seemed that she could bear no more of mingled joy and pain. She let her tears flow as freely as they would. She clung to her mother's hand, smoothing it, kissing it, pressing it to her cheek; and finally, lulled by the sound of her mother's voice crooning an old familiar lullaby, her mind slipped gradually out of reality, and she went to sleep.

Long and long and long she slept, with the sleep of one that is leaving an old life behind, and entering slowly into the new. And for many hours her mother watched her, in the gathering darkness, till after Alixe had come softly in, and lit a torch near by the bed. And later the mother, unwilling to leave her child

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for a single moment, laid herself down, dressed as she was, and, drawing Laure's passive form close to her, finally closed her eyes, and, worn out with emotion and with joy, lost herself in the mists of sleep.

CHAPTER TWELVE

LAURE



THROUGH the long, chilly night, mother and daughter slept together, each with peace in her heart. At dawn, however, madame slipped quietly out of Laure's unconscious embrace, and rose and prepared herself for the day. And presently she left the room, while Laure still slept. It was some time afterwards before there crept upon the blank of the girl's mind a dim, fluttering shadow telling her that light had come again over the world. How long it was before this first sense became a double consciousness, no one knows. Laure's stupor had been so heavy, she had been so utterly dead in her weariness, that it required a powerful subconscious effort to throw off the bonds of sleep. But when the two heavy eyes at

last fell open, she gasped, and sat suddenly up in her bed.

“Holy Mother! it is an angel!”

The face that she looked on smiled sunnily.

“No. I am Lenore.” And she would have come round to the side of the bed, but that Laure held up a hand to stay her.

“Prithee, prithee, do not move, thou spirit of Lenore! Am I, then, come into thy land? Is ’t heaven — for me?”

For an instant, at the easily explainable illusion about that other, the new Lenore’s head drooped, and she sighed. How full of the dead maiden was every member of this Twilight Castle! But again, shaking off the momentary melancholy, she lifted her eyes, and answered Laure’s fixed look. So these two young women, whose histories had been so utterly different, and yet in their way so pitia-
bly alike, learned, in this one long glance, to know each other. Into Laure’s deeply burning eyes, Lenore gazed till she was as one under a hypnotic spell. Her senses were all but swimming before the other turned her look, and then she asked dreamily: “Thou art Lenore. Tell me, who is Lenore?”

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The other hesitated for a moment. She had learned from Alixe, on the previous evening, the history of the strange home-coming, and all that any one knew of what had gone before it; and she realized that any question that Laure might ask must be fully answered. Yet it cost her a strong mental effort before she could say: "I was the wife of thy brother."

"Ah! Gerault! Where is he?" Laure paused for an instant. "Thou — *wast* — his wife, thou sayest?"

Lenore gazed at her sadly, wondering if the wanderer must so soon be confronted with new sorrow. Laure sat there, bewildered, but questioning with her eyes, a suggestion of fear beginning to show in her face. Lenore realized how madame must shrink from telling the story of Gerault's death; so, presently, lifting her eyes to Laure's again, she said in a low voice, —

"Gerault's wife was I, because — since September, thy brother — sleeps — in the chapel — by his father."

Laure listened with wide eyes to these words; and, having heard, she neither moved nor spoke. A few tears gathered slowly, and fell down her

face to her woollen robe, and then she bowed her head till it rested on the hands clasped on her knee. Lenore stood where she was, looking on, knowing not whether to go or stay; realizing instinctively that there are natures that desire to find their own comfort.

While Lenore was still debating the point, Madame Eleanore and Alixe came together into the room; and as soon as madame beheld Lenore, she knew that her daughter had learned all that she was to know of sorrow: that what she herself most dreaded, had mercifully come to pass. And going to the bed, she took Laure into her arms.

Their embrace was as close as the first of yesterday had been. Laure clung to her mother, getting comfort from the mere contact; and, in her child's grief for the dead, Eleanore felt the touch of that sympathy for which she had hungered in silence through the first shock of her loss. For Laure was of her own blood and of Gerault's; had known the Seigneur as brother, companion, and equal, and had looked up to him even as he had looked up to his mother. Thus, bitterly poignant as were these moments of fresh grief,

there was in them also a great consolation, — the consolation of companionship. And when finally madame raised her head, there was written in her face what none had seen there since the time of Laure's departure for her novitiate at La Madeleine. Then she reminded Laure of Alixe's presence, and Laure, looking up, smiled through her tears, and held out both hands.

"Alixe! Alixe! my sister! Art thou glad I am come home?"

"So glad, Laure! There have been many hours empty for want of thee since thy going. And art thou —" she hesitated a little — "art thou to stay with us now?"

Accidentally, inadvertently, had come the question that had lain hidden both in Laure's heart and in her mother's since almost the first moment of the return. Laure herself dared not answer Alixe; but she looked fearfully at her mother, her eyes filled with mute pleading. And Eleanore, seeing the look, made a sudden decision in her heart, —

"Yea! Laure shall stay with us now! There shall be no doubting of it. Laure is my child; and I shall keep her with me, an all Christendom forbid!"

The last sentence flew out in answer to madame's secret fears; and she did not realize how much meaning it might hold for other ears. Her speech was followed by an intense silence. Laure did not dare ask aloud the questions that reason answered for her; and Lenore and Alixe both felt that it was not their place to speak. In the end, then, Eleonore herself had to break the strain, which she did by saying, with a brisk air, —

“Come, come, Laure! Rise, and go into thine own room here. I have laid out one of the old-time gowns, with shoes, chemise,bliault, and under-tunic complete, and also a wimple and head-veil. Make thyself ready for the day, while we go down to break our fast. When thou'rt dressed I will have food brought thee here; and after thou'st eaten, monseigneur will come up to thee. Hasten, for 'tis rarely cold!”

Laure jumped from the bed eager to see her childhood's room again; eager for her meal; most of all eager, in spite of her apprehensiveness, to know what St. Nazaire had to say to her. As she paused to gather her mantle close about her, and to push the hair out of

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her eyes, her gaze chanced to meet that of Lenore. There was between them no spoken word; but in that instant was born a sudden affection which, while they lived together, saw not the end of its growth.

As Eleanore and the two young women left madame's room on their way downstairs, Laure entered alone into the room of her youth and her innocence. It was exactly as it had been on the day she last saw it. The small, curtained bed was ready for occupancy. The chairs, the table, the round steel mirror, the carved wooden chest for clothes, lastly, the small prie-dieu, were just where they had always stood. The wooden shutters were open, and the half-transparent glass was all aflame with the reflection of sunlight on the sea; for the cold, clear morning was advancing. Across a narrow settle, beside one of the windows, lay the clothes that the mother had selected,—the girlhood clothes that she had worn in those years of her other life. Like one that dimly dreams, Laure took these garments up, one by one, and examined them, handling them with the same ruminative tenderness of touch that she might have used for some one that had been

very dear to her, but had died long since,—so long that the bitterness of death had gone from memory.

When she had looked at them for a long time, Laure began slowly to don her clothes. She performed her toilet with all the precision of her maidenhood, coiling her hair with a care that suggested vanity, and adjusting her filet and veil with the same touch that they had known so many times before. Her outer tunic was of green *saie*; and even though her whole form had grown deplorably thin, she found it a little snug in bust and hip. Finally, when she was quite dressed, she sat down at one of the windows to wait for some one to bring food to her. To her surprise, it was Lenore who carried up the tray of bread and milk; and she found herself a little relieved that no former member of the Castle was to see her yet in the familiar dress of long ago. When she took the tray from the frail white hands of her sister-in-law, she murmured gratefully: "I thank thee that thou hast deigned to wait on me, madame."

Lenore's big blue eyes opened wide, as she smiled and answered: "Prithee, say not 'ma-

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dame.' Rather, if thou canst, I would have thee call me 'sister,' for such I should wish to be to thee."

"My sister!" Laure's voice was choked as she raised both arms and threw them about the slender body of the other girl with such abandon that Lenore was obliged to put her off a little. Finally, however, Laure sat down to the table on which she had placed her simple breakfast, and as she carried the first bite to her lips, Lenore moved softly toward the door. Before going out, however, she turned and said quietly: "Thou'lt not be long alone. The Bishop is coming to thee at once."

Laure's spoon fell suddenly into her bowl, and she looked quickly round; but, to her chagrin, Lenore had already slipped away.

Left to herself, Laure could not eat. Hungry as she was, her anxiety and her suspense were greater than her appetite. Why was it that Lenore had so suddenly escaped from her? Why was it that she had seen no members of the Castle company save three women since her home-coming? Why was she forced thus to eat alone? Above all, why should the

Bishop come to her here, instead of receiving her, as had been his custom, in the chapel? Laure remembered the last serious talk she had had with St. Nazaire, and shuddered. In her own mind she realized perfectly the spiritual enormity of her sin; and, however persistently she might refuse to confess it to herself, she knew also what the penalty of that sin must be. It was many minutes before she could force herself to recommence her meal; and she had taken little when there was a tap on the door. She had not time to do more than rise when the door opened, and her mother, followed by St. Nazaire, entered the room.

Madame dropped behind as the Bishop advanced, and Laure bowed before him.

“My child, I trust thou art found well in body?” said St. Nazaire, more solemnly than she had ever heard him speak.

“Yes, monseigneur,” was the subdued reply.

Now madame came up, and indicated a chair to the Bishop, who, after seeing her seated, sat down himself, while Laure remained on her feet in front of them. Then followed a pause,

uncomfortable to all, terrifying to Laure, who was becoming hysterically nervous with dread. She dared not, however, break the silence; and with a convulsive sigh she folded her arms across her breast, and stood waiting for whatever was to come. Monseigneur regarded her closely and steadily, as if he were reading something that he wished to know of her, but at the same time he did not make her shrink from him. On the contrary, his expression brought the assurance that he had lost nothing of his old-time sympathy with human nature. His first question was unhesitatingly direct.

“Laure,” he said very quietly, “art thou bound by the marriage tie to this Bertrand Flammeccœur?”

At the sound of the name Laure trembled, and her white face grew whiter still. “No,” she answered in a half-whisper, at the same time clenching her two hands till the nails pierced her flesh.

“And thou hast lived with him, under his name, since thy departure from the priory of the Holy Madeleine?”

Laure paused for a moment to steady her

voice, and then answered huskily : “ Until two months past.”

“ And in that two months ? ”

“ I have begged my way from where we were — hither.”

“ Thou hast in this time known none but the man Flammeccœur ? ”

Laure crimsoned and put up her hand in protest. Then she said quietly, “ None.”

Monseigneur bowed his head and remained silent for a moment. When he looked at her again it was with a gentler expression. “ Laure,” said he, in a very kindly voice, “ but a little time after thy flight from the priory, I placed upon thee, and upon the man that abducted thee, the ban of excommunication, for violating the holiest laws of the Holy Church. That ban is not yet raised, and by it, as well thou knowest, all that come in voluntary contact with thee are defiled.”

For a moment Laure dropped her head to her breast. When she lifted it again, her face had not changed ; and she asked, “ Can that ban ever be lifted ? ”

“ Yes. By me.”

Laure fell upon her knees before him.

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“What must I do? Tell me the penance! I would give anything — even to my life — yet — nay! There is one thing I will not do.”

St. Nazaire frowned. “What is that?” he asked.

“Father, I will not go back into the priory. I will never return alive into that living death. Rather would I cast myself from the top of the Castle cliff into the sea below, and trust — ”

“Laure! Laure! Be silent!” cried Eleanore, sharply.

Laure stopped and stood motionless, her eyes aflame, her face deathly white, her fingers twining and intertwining among themselves, as she waited for St. Nazaire to speak again. His hands were folded upon his knee, and he appeared lost in thought. Only after an unendurable suspense did he look again into the girl’s eyes, saying slowly, in a tone lower than was habitual to him, —

“Thou tookest once the vows of the nun. These, it is true, thou hast broken continually, and hast abused and violated till their chain of virtue binds thee no more. Yet the words of those vows passed thy lips scarce more than

a year ago ; and for that reason thou art not free. Ere thou canst be absolved of duty to the priory, thou must go to the Mother-prioress and ask her humbly if she will again receive thee into the convent. An she refuse, thou wilt be freed from the bond."

" Monseigneur—will she set me free ? " asked Laure, in a low tone.

" Yea, Laure ; for methinks I shall counsel her so to do. Thou hast not the vocation of a nun. Thy spirit is too much thine own, too freedom-loving, to accept the suppression of that secluded life. If I will, I can see to it that thou 'rt freed from the priory. But that being accomplished—what then, Demoiselle Laure ? "

" Ah — after that — may not the ban be removed ? Can I obtain no absolution ? Can I not be made free to dwell here in my home in my beloved Castle, — my fitting Crépuscule ? — Mother ! Shall I not be received here ? Have I no home ? "

" This is thy home, and I thy mother always. Though my soul be condemned to eternal fire, Laure, thou art my child, the flesh of my flesh and the blood of my blood ; and I will not give thee up."

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“Eleanore!” The Bishop spoke sharply, and his face grew severe. “Eleanore, deceive not thyself. Nor yet thou, thou child of wilfulness! Laure hath sinned not only against the rules of her Church and her God, but against the laws of mankind. Her sin has been great and very ugly. Think not that, by brave words of motherhood, or many tears and pleadings of sudden repentance, she can regain her old position. The stain of this bygone year will remain upon her forever. She is under a heavy ban, and she must go through a rigorous penance ere she can be received again among the undefiled. Art ready, Laure, to place thy sick soul in my hands?”

Laure bent her head.

“Then I prescribe for thee this penance: Thou shalt go alone, on foot, to Holy Madeleine, and there seek of the Reverend Mother thy freedom from the priory. If it be granted, thou mayest return hither to this same room and remain shut up in utter solitude, to pray and fast as rigorously as thy body will admit, for the space of fourteen days. If, by that time, thou art come to see truly the mag-

nitude of thy offence, and if thy mind be purified of evil thoughts and thy heart opened to the abounding mercy of God, I will absolve thee of thy sin, and lift away the ban of Heaven. For meseemeth, my daughter, that thy sin found thee out or ever thou hadst reached this house of safety. There is the mark of suffering upon thy brow, and, seeing it, I bow before the power of God, that holdeth over us whithersoever we may go. But see that in thy lonely hours thou find true repentance for thy evil deed. For if that come not, then truly shalt thou be an outcast on the face of the earth. I will go to-day to the priory to talk with the Mère Piteuse, if thy heart accepteth my word."

Laure fell upon her knees before the Bishop and kissed his hand in token of submission. St. Nazaire suffered her for a few moments to humble herself, and then, lifting her up, he rose himself and quickly left the room.

Eleanore remained a few moments longer with her daughter, and then went away, leaving Laure alone again, to dread the ordeal that was before her, the facing of the assemblage

of nuns in that place that she remembered as her heart's prison.

By order of the Bishop, Laure was left alone all day, and this twenty-four hours was the most wretched that she had to spend after her return to *Le Crépuscule*. On the following day she went alone to the priory,—not on foot, as the Bishop had at first commanded; for the snow was too deep, and Laure too much exhausted by her privations of the last two months, for her safely to endure the fatigue of such a walk. She rode thither on horseback; and possibly extracted more soul's good out of the ride than she would have got afoot, for the whole way was laden with bitter memories and grief and shame. The Bishop himself met her at the priory gate, and he remained at her side throughout the time that she was there. The ordeal was not terrible. *Mère Piteuse* bore out her name, and Laure thought that the spirit of the Saviour had surely descended upon the reverend woman. As an unheard-of concession, the penitent was permitted to recant her vows before only the eight officers of the priory assembled in the chapter-house, instead of before the whole

company of nuns in the great church; and thus Laure did not see at all her former companion and abettor, Sœur Eloise, a meeting with whom she had dreaded more than anything else. And when, in the afternoon, Laure finally rode away from the priory gate, it was with a heart throbbing with devotion for St. Nazaire and his goodness to her. Swiftly and eagerly, in the falling twilight, she traversed the road leading back to the Castle, and, when she reached home, night had fallen. Her mother, who had spent the day in the deepest anxiety, was waiting for her in the great hall, and, the moment that Laure entered, weary with the now unusual exercise, she cried out, "It is well? Thou art dismissed?"

And as Laure began to answer the question with a full description of the day, her mother drew her slowly up the stairs, across the hall, and finally into her own narrow room, which was to be the chamber of penance. When they entered there, Laure became suddenly silent; for the little place was dark and chill, and the thought of what was before her struck an added tremor to her heart. Madame read her thoughts and said gently, —

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“Be not so sad, dear child. When thou thinkest of the fair, pure, loving life that lies before us, in this Castle of thy youth, surely fourteen little days of peaceful solitude cannot fright thee? Think always that God is on high, and that around thee are those that love thee well; and thus thou canst not be very miserable. Lights and food shall be brought; and then — I bid thee make much of thy solitude, my child; for there is no more healing balm for wounded souls. Now, commending thee to the mercy of the All-merciful, I leave thee.”

In the darkness, Laure clung to her mother as if it were their last embrace, and madame had to put the girl's hands away before she would bear to be left alone. But at last the door was closed and bolted on the outside; and Laure, within, knew that her imprisonment was begun. Feeling her way to a chair, she seated herself thereon, and laid her head in her hands. Burning and incoherent thoughts hurried through her brain, and she was still lost in these when there was a soft tap at her door, and the outer bolt was drawn. She rose and stumbled hurriedly to open it, but there was no one outside. On the floor was a burn-

ing candle, and a tray on which stood a jug of water and a loaf of bread. As she took them in, Laure experienced a wave of desolation. However, she set the food and drink down on her table, lighted the torch on the wall at the candle-flame, and finally sat herself down to eat. No grace to God passed her lips as she took her first bite from the loaf; for her heart was bitter in its weariness. But after she had eaten and drunk she lost the inclination to brood; and, overcome with weariness and the emotions of the day, she hurriedly disrobed, extinguished both her lights, and crept, with her first sense of comfort, into the warmly covered bed. For a long time she lay there, chilly and a little nervous, but thinking of nothing. Then gradually her spirit grew calmer; some of the weariness was done away, and she fell asleep.

When next she woke it was daylight, — a gray, January morning, — and Laure realized, rather disconsolately, that she could sleep no more for the time. Therefore she left her bed, threw a mantle around her, and went to the door, to see if there might be food without. Somewhat to her dismay, she found the door locked fast, and, having no means of knowing

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what the hour might be, she thought that possibly she had overslept, and that she should have nothing to eat throughout the morning. The heaviness of her head told her that she had slept too long; and, not daring to get back to bed again, she began resignedly to dress. She was in the midst of her toilet when there came a tap at the door, and she flew to open it. Outside stood a kitchen-boy, who handed her a tray containing fresh bread and water, and asked her with formal respect for the stale food of the night before. This she gave him; and immediately the door was shut and rebolted.

With grim precision Laure finished dressing and broke her fast, meantime keeping her thoughts fixed on the most trivial subjects. But when her meal was over, and she knew how long the day must be, and realized that there was no escape from herself, she sat down in the largest chair in the room, let her eyes wander over the familiar objects, and allowed her thoughts to take what form they would. The terrible fatigue of her lonely journey was quite gone now. Nor was there in her own person anything to remind her of her recent



*M*OTHER and child were happy to sit all
day in the flower-strewn meadow.—Page 402

suffering. Her body was clean, well-clothed, and warm, and, in her youth, the memory of the past terrible two months grew dim, and instead there rose up before her mental vision a very different picture, — an image, — the image of the idol and the ruin of her life : her joy, her shame, her ecstasy, and her despair ; Bertrand Flammeccœur, the troubadour, in his matchless, irresponsible untrustworthiness, his incomparable beauty, his fiery enthusiasm. For, strange as it may be, all the bitterness, all the suffering that this man had brought her, had not killed her love for him nor blackened his image in her heart. There being nothing to check her fancy, Laure went mentally back to the hour of her flight with the troubadour, and passed slowly over the whole period of their life together, — from the first days of physical agony and mental shame through the period of increasing delight, to the culmination of her happiness in him and the beginning of its end. Once more she reviewed their journey out of Brittany up the north coast to Calais, whence, in the fair spring weather, they had taken passage to Dover, in England, thence making their way

by slow stages to London. Here, in the train of the Duke of Gloucester, uncle of the young Richard, the most powerful man in the kingdom, the two had passed their summer. To Laure it was a summer of fairyland. Flamme-cœur had become her god, and she saw him ascend height after height of popularity and favor. His nationality and his profession won for him instant recognition, for trouvères from Provence were Persian nightingales to the England of that day. And after his first introduction into high places, his breeding, his dress, and his graceful personality brought him an enviable position, especially among the women of the court. Laure passed always as his wife, and was adroitly exploited among the court gallants. She was still too single-minded to receive the slightest taint from this life. She was found to be as incorruptible as she was pretty, and by this unusual fact her own reputation went up, and her popularity rivalled that of the troubadour. If this manner of life sometimes weighed on her and brought her something of remorse, she found her consolation in the fact that Flamme-cœur never wavered in his fidelity. For the time

being he was thoroughly infatuated with her ; and in their stolen hours of golden solitude both of them found their reward for the oft-times wearisome round of pleasures that, with them, constituted work.

Now, alone, in her solitary prison-room, Laure of *Le Crépuscule* reviewed her high and holy noon of love, forgetting its subsequence, brooding only over its supreme forgetfulness, till the madness of it was tingling in her every vein, and there rushed over her again, in a tumultuous wave, all that fierce longing, all that hopeless desire, that she thought herself to have endured for the last time. In their early days *Flammecœur* had been so much her companion, so devoted to her in little, pretty, telling ways, so constant to her and to her alone, that the thought of any life other than the one with him would have been to her like a promise of eternal death. It was not more their hours of delirium than those of silent communion that they had held together, which brought her now the tears of hopeless yearning. All that she desired without him, was death. All that she had loved or cared for was with him.

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At this time came to her the thought of Lenore; and she had an instinctive feeling that, had God seen fit to give her that most precious of all gifts, motherhood, this penitential cell had not been the end for her.

Three days and three nights did Laure spend in this state of bitter rebellion against her lot; and then, from overwishing, came a change. Up to this time, in her new flood of grief for the separation from Flammeccœur, she had driven from her mind every creeping memory of the day of his change toward her. Another woman had come upon the horizon of his life: a young and noble Englishwoman, of high station. And soon he was pursuing her with the ardor that he no longer spent on Laure. This lady was one of the first that they had met in England, and Laure had liked her before Flammeccœur's new passion began to develop. But with her first real fears, the poor girl's jealousy was born, and soon it became the moving spirit of her life. Many times in the ensuing weeks — those bitter weeks of early autumn — did angry words pass between her and her protector, her only shield from the world in this strange land.

Once, in a fit of uncontrollable grief and passion, she had left him, and for two days wandered about the streets of London till starvation drove her back to the lodgings of the Flaming-heart. Her reception — of quiet indifference — on her return showed her that her world was in a state of dissolution. For a week she dwelt among its ruins, and then, when she demanded it, he told her that she was no longer dear to him, and he begged her to take what money he had and to set out whither she would, assuring her that she would find no difficulty in securing some excellent abiding-place in this adopted land. Laure took her dismissal heroically. She knew him too well to be horrified at his suggestions as to her procedure; and, refusing his gifts of money, she sold the clothes and ornaments that he had given her in a happier day, and with the proceeds started on her return to Crépuscule. Her little store gave out when she had scarce more than reached France; and the last half of the journey had been accomplished by literally begging her way from hut to hut, never giving up the idea of at last reaching the

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only refuge she could trust, — the place where now she sat dreaming out her woe.

Through the bitter hours when her old jealousy took possession of her again and seared her with its hot flames, Laure found herself, more than once, gazing fixedly at the little priedieu in the corner of the room, where, as a child, she had been wont to kneel each night and morning. Since the hour she had left the priory, a prayer had scarcely passed her lips; and now, in the time of reactive sorrow, she felt a pride about kneeling in supplication to Him whose laws she had so freely broken. In the course of time, for so doth solitude work changes in the hearts of the most stubborn, the spirit of real repentance of her sin came over her; and then, for the first time in her young life, she wept unselfish tears. It was only inch by inch that she crept back toward the place of heart's peace. But at length, on the tenth day of her penance, she went to her God; and, throwing herself at the feet of the crucifix, claimed her own from the All-merciful.

Never in her life of prayers had Laure prayed as she prayed now. Now at last

God was a living Being, and she was come home to Him for forgiveness and for comfort. Her words sprang from her deepest heart. Tears of joy, not pain, welled up within her; and it seemed as if she felt her purity coming back to her again. She believed that she was received before the throne, and listened to; and no absolution of a consecrated bishop had brought her such confidence as this, her first unlettered prayer.

When she rose from her knees it was as if she had been bathed in spirit. Her old joy of youth was again alive within her and shone forth from her eyes with a radiant softness. A strange quiet took possession of her; a new peace was hidden in her heart; tranquillity reigned about her, and the four days of solitude that remained were all too short. She was learning herself anew; but she dreaded that time when others should look into her face and think to find there what she knew was gone from her forever. After her first prayer she did not often resume the accepted attitude of communication with the Most High; yet she prayed almost continually, with a dreamy fervor peculiar to her state.

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She still thought of *Flammecœur*, but no longer with desire; only with a gentle regret for the fever of his soul and that he could never know such peace as hers. She also felt remorse for the part she had played in his life; and this remorse was now her only pain. She suffered under it; but it was easier to endure than the terrible, restless longing that had once consumed her. Indeed, at this time, Laure's spirituality was exaggerated; for solitude is apt to breed exaggeration in whatever mood the recluse happens to be. But this state was also bound to know its reaction; and, upon the whole, it was as well that the penitential fortnight was near its end.

On the afternoon of the fourteenth day, Laure dressed herself in the somberest robe to be found in her chest, — a loose tunic of rusty black, with mantle of the same, and a rosary around her waist by way of belt. She braided her hair into two long plaits, and bound these round and round her head like a heavy filet. This was all of her coiffure. When she was dressed, she stood in front of her mirror and looked at herself by the smoky light of a torch. Her vanity was not flattered by the reflection;

but steel is deceitful sometimes, and Laure did not know how much younger she had grown in the two weeks of her penance. As the hour of liberty approached, she became not a little excited. The thought of being surrounded with such a throng of familiar faces set her aflame with eagerness; and she waited, literally counting the seconds, till she should be set free.

Punctually at the hour in which, two weeks before, Laure had been left alone, her door was opened, and Eleanore and Lenore came together into the room, to lead the prisoner down to the chapel. Madame clasped her warmly by the hand, and looked searchingly into her face: but that was all the salutation that was given, for the ban of excommunication was still upon her. And so, without a word, the three moved quickly to the stairs, and, descending, passed at once into the lighted chapel.

Of all the ceremonies that had been performed in that little room since it was built, more than two centuries before, the one that now took place was perhaps the most impressive, certainly the most unique. Laure, in her penitential garb, presented a curious contrast to the gayly robed Castle company, and to St.

Nazaire, in his most gorgeous of canonicals. Yet Laure's face was more interesting to study than anything else in the crowded room. St. Nazaire, while he confessed and absolved her, watched her with an interest that he had never felt for her before; and he realized that probably never again would he hear such a confession as hers. She told him the whole story of her life after her flight from the priory, with neither break, hesitation, tremor, nor tear. She took her absolution in uplifted silence. And when the ban of excommunication was raised from her, neither the Bishop nor her mother could guess, from her face, what her feeling was.

When she had been blessed, and the general benediction pronounced, all the company came crowding to her to give her welcome. After that followed a great feast, at which Laure ate not a mouthful, and drank nothing but a cup of milk. And finally, when all the merrymaking was through, the young woman returned alone to her room, and, this time with her door bolted from within, lay down upon her bed and wept as if her heart had finally dissolved in tears.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LENORE



ON the morning of the sixteenth of January, Laure went into the spinning-room with the other women, to begin the old, familiar work. The sight of that room brought back to her a peculiar sensation. Long-forgotten memories of her girlhood's yearnings and restless discontents, half-formed plans and desires, picture after picture of what she had once imagined convent life to be, crowded thick upon her, and caused her to shudder, knowing what these vague dreams had led her to. Here was the room, with its row of wheels and tambour-frames, and, at the end, the big, wooden loom, filled with red warp. Everywhere were little disorderly heaps of flax and uncarded wool, bits of thread and silk, and long woollen

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remnants clipped from uneven tapestry borders. In a moment this place would be alive with the droning buzz of wheels, the clack-clack of the loom, and the bright chatter of feminine voices. Laure heard it all in the first glance down the room, and in the same instant she lived a lifetime here. Before her eyes was an endless vista of mornings spent in this place upon work that could never keep her thoughts from paths where they should not stray. Alas ! with *Flammecœur* she had neither toiled nor spun.

In neither face nor manner did Laure betray any suggestion of her feeling ; and she found herself presently seated at a wheel, between Alixe, who was at the tapestry frame, and Lenore, who had come to the room for the first time in many weeks, and was engaged in fashioning a delicate little garment of white *saie*. Madame, at the head of the room, was embroidering a square of linen and overseeing the work of every one else ; and she glanced, every now and then, rather searchingly into her daughter's face, finding in it, however, nothing that could cause her anxiety ; for Laure was ashamed of her own sensations, and strove bravely to conceal them.

Possibly this scene might have held out promise of reward to the thinker, the psychologist, or the humanitarian. Of all these quiet, busy women, was there one whose dull, passionless exterior did not cover an intricate and tumultuous heart-history? The rebellious thought-life of Alixe was no less interesting, despite her inactivity, than the deadening sorrow through which Lenore had passed. Nor had the early life of Eleanore, with its doubtful joys and its bitter periods of loneliness, left any stronger traces in her face than had the long after-years of rigid self-suppression. She had nearly overcome her once devastating habit of self-analysis, by forcing herself to take an unselfish interest in those around her. But the marks of her later and nobler struggles with grief lay as plainly in her face as those of her younger life. Only, the influence of her youth, with its rebellions and its solitudes, was to be found bodily transferred into the character of Laure, who had, in her infancy, absorbed her mother into herself. These four women, by reason either of years or station, had experienced much in the ways of joy and sorrow. But to what depths of unhappiness all the other

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pathetically colorless lives of the uninstructed and unloved women of that day had sunk, cannot be surmised by any one who has seen what strange courses loneliness and solitude will take. Who knows how great a self-struggle may result only in a pallid, vacant face and a negative personality? And what had they, all these neglected women of the chivalric age, to give them life, color, or force? Men did battle and feats of arms, expecting their ladies to sit at home, to toil and spin and bear them heirs, and, when their time came, haply die. So much we all know. But how much these same women, having something of both soul and brain, may have tried to use them in their small way, who has cared to surmise?

The January morning wore along, and by and by the fitful chatter became more fitful: the pauses grew longer; for every one was weary with work, and with the incessant noise of loom and wheel. Laure, who through the morning had been covertly watching Lenore at her task, saw that the young woman had grown paler than was her wont, and that the shadows under her eyes had deepened till their

effect against her pallor was startling. Gradually Lenore's hands moved more slowly. She would pause for a moment, and then, with a slight start, return to her work with so conscious an effort that Laure was more than once on the point of crying to her to stop. Presently, however, Lenore herself looked toward madame's chair with an appeal in her eyes and a faintly murmured word on her lips.

Eleanore glanced at her, and then rose at once and went over to her side. "Why didst thou not speak sooner? Go quickly to thy room and lie down. Shall I send Alixe with thee?"

"Nay! Let me rather be alone!" And Lenore, hastily gathering her work into her arms, slipped from her place and was gone from the room.

The little scene caused no comment. Only Laure, who was not accustomed to the sight of Lenore's transparent skin and almost startling frailty, sat thinking about her after she was gone. How forlorn must be her poor existence! If she had greatly loved Gerault,—and surely any maiden would have loved him,—how gray her world must have become!

how without hope her life ! Laure lost herself completely in a revery of Lenore's sorrows, and forgot, for the time, how weary she herself was : how her foot ached with treading the wheel, and how irritated were her finger-tips with the long unaccustomed manipulation of thread. But it came as an intense relief when she heard her mother say softly, —

“Go thou, Laure, to thy sister's room. Make her comfortable, if thou canst. Take the wheel also with thee and finish thy skein there.”

“Nay, madame. The whirl of the wheel is distressing to Lenore ; I saw it while she sat here. I will finish after noon if thou wilt, but Lenore must not be disturbed.”

Madame nodded to her, and Laure slipped away, not noticing how Alixe's eyes followed her, or what disappointment was written in her face. For hitherto this ministering to Lenore had fallen to Alixe's share, and it had been the proudest pleasure of her life.

Lenore was lying upon her bed, which, some weeks previously, had been moved over close beside the windows of her room, that she might always have a view of the sea. When

Laure entered, she scarcely moved, and her great eyes continued to rove round the room. The new-comer paused in the doorway and gazed at her a moment or two before she asked: "May I enter? May I come and sit beside you?"

Lenore smiled slightly; but there was no actual welcome in her face as she said, in her usual, gentle tone: "Certes. As ever, I was idle and unthinking. Come thou in, Laure, and sit where thou canst gaze out upon the sea. Look, there is a glint of sun on it, even through the folds of the clouds."

Laure looked to where she pointed, and then came silently over and seated herself in a large chair that stood between the bed and the window, in a little jut in the wall. Her eyes were turned not to the many-paned glass, however, but rather upon the figure of Lenore, who was now looking off through a half-opened pane, through which blew fitful gusts of icy wind. The two young women remained here in silence for some moments, each in her own position, thinking silently. Suddenly, however, Laure shivered, and then sprang to her feet, saying: "Thou 'lt surely

freeze here! Let me cover thee." She took up a thick coverlet that lay over the foot of the bed and placed it, folded double, upon Lenore's form. Then, glancing down into the milk-white face, she said again: "Let me bring thee something—a little food—some wine. Thou 'rt so pale—so ill!"

"Peace, Laure! I am comfortable. I lie thus for hours every day. Ah! for how many hours in the past months—"

She looked up into Laure's face, and the eyes of the two women met, in an unfathomable gaze. Then Laure went slowly back to her place, wishing that she might close the window, but not daring to interfere with her sister's desired sight of the sea. After she had sat down, Lenore once more lost herself in a reverie, which, however, her companion did not respect.

"Lenore," she said in a low, rather melancholy voice, "how is it that thou canst endure this life of thine,—thou, young and bright and gay and all unused to this dim dwelling; how hath such existence not already killed thee? Tell me, how hast thou fared since Gerault went?"

Lenore turned her eyes from the sea and fixed them on Laure's face. She wondered a little why she did not resent the question, not realizing that it was the first throb of natural understanding that had come to her out of *Le Crépuscule*. Lenore's first impulse of affection toward her new sister had altered a little in the past two weeks. Since she had heard and understood the story of Laure's last months, the white-souled girl had shrunk from contact with her whose career lay shrouded in so black a depth. Yet now Laure's tone, as she spoke, and, more than that, the expression in her eyes, touched a key in Lenore's nature that had long been unsounded, and which brought a tremor of unwonted feeling to her heart. Quickly repressing the impulse toward tears, she gave a moment's pause, and then answered in a dreamy, reflective way, as if she were for the first time examining the array of her own emotions, —

“ Meseemeth that, since the day of Gerault's death, a part of me hath been asleep. Save when, on the night of his home-coming, I lay beside his body and touched again his hair and his eyes — ”

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“Holy God! Thou couldst lie beside the dead!”

“Ah, was it not Gerault come home to me — seeming as if he slept? Since that time, and the night that followed it, I say, I have not wept for him. Mine eyes are dry. There is sometimes a fire in them; but the tears never come. And my heart oftentimes burns, and yet I do not very bitterly grieve. I know not why, but my sorrow hath not been all that I should have made it. I have been soothed with shadows. I have found great comfort in yon rolling sea. And then there is also the child, — Gerault’s son, — the Lord of Crépuscule.”

“Yes, the child! Oh, I know how thou lovest him — I know!”

“Thou knowest? How?”

“Methinks, Lenore, I understand the mother-love. How should I have praised God had he deemed me also worthy of it! But I was not. I know well ’t was a vain desire. But, oh, to hold in mine arms a little one, a babe, and to know it for mine own! Wouldst not deliver up thy soul for that, Lenore?”

Lenore looked at her with a vague little smile. "Perhaps; I do not know. My babe must carry on his father's name, and so I love him. Yea, I will bear any suffering so that he come into the world; for Gerault said to me long since that such must be my duty and my great joy. He spake somewhat as you do. Yet I know not that eagerness thou speakest of."

Laure examined the ethereal figure lying before her with new curiosity; and under the gaze of the calm, deep-hued eyes her own were kindled with a brighter gleam. "Hast thou not loved, Lenore?" she asked. "Knowest thou nothing of the joy of living, the two in one, united by divine fire? Dost thou not worship God for the reason that there is now in thee a double soul? Wake! Wake from thy dream-life! Suffer! For out of suffering, great joy will come upon thee!"

As she met Laure's look, a new light burned in Lenore's eyes, and the other saw her quiver under those words. Finally, freeing her gaze, she said very softly: "I would not wake. How, indeed, should I live, if I roused myself? Life and love and the world are hidden

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away behind the far hills of Rennes. Here I must dwell forever in the twilight. So let me dream! Ah, Laure, thou too, thou too wilt come to it. The fever may burn within thee still, but time will cool it. Tell me, Laure," she added, smitten with a sudden curiosity that was foreign to her usual self, "tell me, Laure, how didst thou find courage to run out from thy dreams in the priory into life with Flammeceur, the trouvère?"

At sound of the name, Laure flushed scarlet, and then turned pale again. "Flammeceur! Flammeceur!" she murmured to herself. Then, suddenly, she shook the spell away. "Ah, how did I fall from heaven to hell and find heaven in hell? I cannot tell thee more than thou thyself hast said. I was buried while I was yet alive; and so I arose from mine own tomb and escaped back to the world of living things. I was among sleepers, yet could not myself sleep. After a time fire, not blood, began to run in my veins. And so, in the end, I rode away with the Flaming-heart. And I loved him! *how* I loved him! God be merciful to me! Ah, Lenore, how do they put us poor, long-haired things into the

fair world, giving us hearts and brains and souls, and thereon bid us all only to spin—to spin, and weave, and so, perchance, kiss, once, and then go back to spin again?”

Laure was half hysterical, but wholly in earnest,—so much in earnest that she had forgotten her companion; and when she looked at her again, she found Lenore lying back on her pillows, her breath coming more rapidly than usual, but her face rigidly calm, her blue eyes wandering through space, and Laure perceived that she had rejected the passionate words and kept herself still in the dream state.

It was well that at this moment there came a tap at the door. Laure cried entrance, and as Alixe came in from the hall, Madame Eleanore appeared from the other door that led to Laure's room, and thence through to madame's own chamber. Evidently the work hours were over, and it was time for the noon meal.

Lenore did not care to descend to meat, and she asked Alixe to bring a glass of wine and water and a manchet of bread to her room. This request Alixe joyfully promised to fulfil, and then Laure and her mother

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together left the room, Laure in the throes of a painful reaction from strong feeling, and with a sense, moreover, that Lenore was relieved to have her go.

In this last conjecture, or rather, sense, Laure was right. But it was not through dislike of her sister that Lenore was glad to be alone again. It was rather because the young widow had been powerfully moved by Laure's words, and she wanted time and solitude to readjust herself from the new and disquieting ideas that had been put into her mind. Alixe believed her to be fatigued, and perhaps suffering; and, understanding her nature much better than Laure did, she brought the invalid everything that she wanted in the way of food, and then left her, believing that she could sleep.

It was afternoon in the Castle. Dinner was at an end. Madame had betaken herself to her own room, for prayer and meditation. The damsels were all scattered, some to their own small rooms, some to the courtyard and the snow. Laure was in the chapel, before the altar, struggling with her newly roused demon of unrest. In the long room, off the great

hall, was Courtoise, seated in Gerault's old place, before a reading-desk, with an illuminated parchment before him. It was part of "The Romant de la Rose," and he was reading the passage descriptive of the garden of *Déduit*. Although nothing, perhaps, could be found in the literature of that day better fitted to appeal to a dweller of Le Crépuscule, the mind of the dark-browed Courtoise was not very securely fixed upon his book. His eyes rested steadily on one word; his forehead was puckered, and there was an expression on his face which, had he been a maid, would likely have portended tears. Courtoise was not a man to weep; but he had lately fallen recklessly into the habit of his former lord, of coming here to sit with a parchment before him, as an excuse for brooding hopelessly on the trouble in his soul. His head was now so far bent that he did not see a woman's figure glide into the room. Not till she stood over his very desk did he look up with a little start: "Thou, Alixe!" he said half impatiently.

"Yea, Alixe, Master Courtoise. Thine eyes, it seems, can make out great shapes very

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well, but halt an untold time over one curly letter."

"What sayest thou? Thy words, Alixe, are like the quips of the dwarf; but thou hast not his license to say them."

"Ahimé, Courtoise," she came lazily round the table till she stood beside his chair, "seek to quarrel with me if thou wilt. A quarrel would be a merry thing in this Castle. For I am dull—dull—piteously dull, good master!"

Courtoise looked at her rather grimly. "Art thou dull indeed, Mistress Alixe? What thinkest thou, then, of all of us?"

"Thou also, quiet one? Well, I had guessed it. Yet methought—" she paused, with mischief in her eyes; and Courtoise, who knew some of her moods, was wise enough not to let her finish the sentence. Rising from his place, he went and got a tabouret from a corner of the room, and, placing it beside the chair at the desk, sat down on it, motioning Alixe to the seat beside him.

Alixé refused the offer. "Nay, nay, Master Courtoise. Thou shalt sit in the brawny chair, for thou'rt to be my adviser. Sit, I prithee,

and let me take the little place, and then list to me carefully while I do talk on a matter of grave importance."

"Name of Heaven! Is there something of importance in this house of shadows?"

"There is Madame Lenore," she said soberly.

"Lenore! Ah, 'tis of her thou wouldst speak," he cried, his whole face lighting.

Suddenly Alixe broke into a rippling mockery of laughter. "There, Courtoise, thou art betrayed! Nay, I will be still about it, for I also love her. Now, to be cruel, my talk is not to be of her, but of myself, even me,—Alixe No-name. Thou, Courtoise, art in something the same position in *Le Crépuscule* as I, save that thou hast a binding tie of interest here. Then canst thou not offer me a moment's thought, a moment's sympathy? For, in very truth, I need them both."

With Alixe's first words, Courtoise had flushed an angry scarlet; but with her last, his ordinary color came back to him, and he looked at her in friendly fashion as he answered: "What time and thought I have are

thine, Alixe. But thou must show me thy need of sympathy."

"Why, let it be just for dwelling in *Le Crépuscule*. And—if thou wouldst have more—for holding no certain place here. There was a time, after Laure had gone away, and when the Seigneur was in Rennes, that I was really wanted. I brought comfort to madame, and I know she loved me well. And also, since Madame Lenore was widowed, I have been sometimes a companion to her. But now there are two daughters here. Madame's life is full with them; and my place in *Le Crépuscule* is only one of tolerance. Therefore—lend thine ear closely, Courtoise—I would go away, I, Alixe No-name, out into the world, to see if there be not a fortune hidden for me beyond the eastern hills. I would go to Rennes, or even farther, to try what city life might be; yet I would not have the trouble of explanation and protests and insistence, and finally of farewell, with the dwellers here. Rather, I would just steal away, some night, nor return again hither evermore. What say you, Courtoise? Think you that that wish is all ingratitude?"

It was some moments before Courtoise replied. His face was a little turned from Alixe, but she could see that his brow was knit in thought. At length he answered her: "Nay, Alixe, thy wish is not ingratitude. Rather, indeed, I have sometimes thought that Madame Eleanore showed something of ingratitude toward thee; for thou wast a daughter to her in her sorrow; and since the return of mademoiselle, I have seen thee many a time set aside.

"If thou wouldst fare forth into the world—well, Alixe, the world is a wide place, and many dangers lurk therein. Yet thou art stout of heart, and strong enow in body, and methinks there are few like thee that would of choice dwell in such a place as this. I myself, were it only not for — Ah, well, if thou wouldst go forth and make thy way at once to Rennes, depart not now in the winter season. Thou'dst freeze on thy way. Wait till the spring is upon us, and the woods are light at night. And then —"

"Then thou'lt help me? Wilt thou, Courtoise? Wilt thou tell madame when I am gone wherefore it was I went? Wilt thou give her messages of faithful love? Wilt —"

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“Wait, wait! Ask no more than that,” he said, smiling thoughtfully. “When the days are warmer and the spring is in the leaf, when the blood flows fast through the veins, and the head burns with new life—” he drew a sudden, quick breath, and Alixe, looking upon him with new interest, said quickly and softly :

“Then come thou, also, Courtoise, out into the wide world! Let us together go forth to seek our fortunes. Thou’lt find me not too weak a comrade, I promise.”

Courtoise’s smile vanished, and he shook his head, a look of sadness stealing into his eyes: “Think you, Alixe, that after the death of my well-loved lord I should have stayed in this Castle to grow gray and mouldy ere my time, had it not held for me a trust so sacred that I could not give it up?”

“Lenore,” murmured Alixe, gently.

“Thou knowest it. Since the first day that she came home with the Seigneur, I knew that here she would sadly need a friend; and indeed she hath been my very saint. I have worshipped her more as an angel than as a woman, in her purity; and my heart hath all but broken for the great sadness of her life here. And if by

remaining I can serve her in any way, in thought or in deed ; if it giveth her comfort to have me in the Castle, I would sooner cut off my hand than leave her here alone. I feel also that my lord knoweth that I am faithful to the trust he left with me ; and I would not forfeit his dead thanks. Therefore, Alixe, ask me not to return into the world with thee or with another."

While he spoke, Alixe had watched him fixedly, and had seen no suspicion either in tone or in face of a deeper feeling for Lenore than he had confessed. Now she sighed quietly, and said in a gentle voice : " Courtoise, I think thou shouldst not mourn that thou'rt to dwell here ; for thou hast thy trust, and thou hast some one to serve, always. Therefore fear nothing, and give thanks to God ; for with Lenore in thy world — "

" Alas, alas, Alixe, there is that fear in me ! Should Lenore be lost — should Lenore die — ah ! "

Low as was his voice, the agony in it was unmistakable ; and now Alixe was sure of all his secret : that he also loved Lenore as man sometimes loves woman, — purely. And she

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could find no words to say to him when the usually self-contained and tranquil man laid his head down on the table before him and did not try to hide his grief.

It was at this inopportune moment that Laure, tired of prayers, and still consumed by her restless fever, rushed in upon the two in the long room. Her old-time wild gayety was upon her, and she did not pause before the position of Courtoise, who, however, quickly straightened up. Laure scarcely saw it. She knew only that here were the companions of her youth, and as she entered she cried out to them, —

“Alixé ! Courtoise ! Up and out with me ! Burn ye not ? Stifle ye not in this dim hole ? Courtoise, is our old sailing-boat still in its mooring ? Let us fare forth, all three, and set out upon the wintry sea ! Let us feel this January wind pull and strain at the ropes ! Let us watch the foamy waves pile up before and behind us — ”

“ Mon Dieu ! ”

“ Mademoiselle, it is impossible. The boat lies on the beach ; two days’ work would not fit her for the water.”

Laure stamped angrily on the floor. "Something, then, something! I will get out into the cold, into the snow; I will move, I will feel, I will breathe again!"

It was so much the wild, free Laure, it had in it so much her old-time magnetism of comradeship, so much the spirit of the dead Gerault, desirous of action, that Alixe and Courtoise were drawn irresistibly into her mood. Both of them moved forward, while Alixe cried gayly: "The hawks! Come, we will ride!"

"The hawks!" echoed Laure. "Run, Courtoise, and get the horses, while Alixe and I go don our riding-garb and jess the birds!"

Without a moment's hesitation, rather with a throb of pleasure, Courtoise ran obediently away toward the stables, while the young women hurried to their rooms. In twenty minutes the wild trio were dashing across the lowered drawbridge, all well mounted, hawk on wrist, spur at heel, with Laure in the lead. Down the road for the space of a mile they went, and then struck off to the snowy moor. They rode long and they rode hard, finding scarce a single quarry, but letting their pent-up spirits out in this free and healthful exercise. When

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they came in again to the Castle courtyard, it was in starry darkness ; and not one of the three but felt a new strength to resist the dead life of the Castle.

Perhaps, had Courtoise known how Lenore had quietly wept away the afternoon in her solitude and loneliness, he had not appeared at evening meat with air so vigorous, eye so bright, and appetite so ready. Lenore, however, was never known to make a plaint ; and she came to table with her cheeks hardly paler than usual, though her downcast eyes were shrunken with tears, and their lids were tinged with feverish red.

Men say that it is one of the irrevocable blessings that Time should move as surely as he does. But when the hours, nay, the minutes, lag away as drearily as they did in *Le Crépuscule* that winter, one feels no gratitude to Time ; but rather a resentment that his immortality should be so dead-alive. Yet winter did pass, however slowly. In March the frozen chains of the prisoned earth were riven. Streams began to flow fast and full. The snow melted and soaked into the rich, black soil, making it ready for the seed. The doors of

the peasants' huts were opened to the sun and rain. Flocks of storks began to fly northward on their return from the Nile to their unsettled fatherland. Spring caught the earth in a tender embrace; and wherever her warm breath touched the soil, a flower appeared, to mark the kiss.

To Lenore the spring warmth was as heaven to a soul newly freed from earth-sorrow and suffering. Now the windows of her room could all be thrown wide open to the outer air. The whole sea lay before her, strewn with sunlight, and frosted with white foam. She saw the fishing-fleet from St. Nazaire go up past the bay, on its way to the herring fisheries; and then she was suddenly inspired again with an uncontrollable desire for the sea. That afternoon she sent one of her damsels to find Courtoise. He came to her room breathless, and eager to learn her will; and to him, without delay, she made known her imperative wish to be upon the sea.

Courtoise found himself in a dilemma. He knew that there was a boat at her disposal, for he and Laure and Alixe had now been sailing every day for a fortnight. He believed Lenore

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to be aware of this, though as a matter of fact she was not; nevertheless he at first refused her request point-blank. After that, because she wept, he temporized. Finally, in despair, he went and consulted madame, who was horrified at the idea. Lenore still insisted, appealed to every one in the Castle, from Alixe and Laure to the very scullions. Finding herself repulsed on every hand and powerless to act of her own accord, she became, all at once, utterly irresponsible, and made a scene that threatened to end everything with her. Half unbalanced by months of illness and lonely brooding, and tortured by this morbid and unreasonable fancy, she wept and screamed and raved, and threw herself about her bed, till she was in a state of complete exhaustion, and every one in the Castle awaited the result of her paroxysm with unconcealed distress.

After this time she did not leave her bed. She was very weak, and she seemed to have lost all ambition and all desire to move or even to speak. Her days she spent in silent moodiness, her nights in tossing feverishly about the bed. She seemed to take no notice of the little attentions so tenderly showered upon her

by every one; except that she was pleased to see the little spring flowers, tender pink bells and anemones, that David and Courtoise spent hours in gathering at the edge of the forest on the St. Nazaire road. Upon these she smiled, and for many days kept a bouquet of them at her side, carrying them often to her lips. But after a little while she grew impatient of these simple flowers, and began to plead for violets, which no one in the world could find in Brittany before May. Courtoise brooded for two days over his inability to supply her want, and every one condoled her. Indeed, her own condition was not more pathetic than that of the Castle household in their eagerness for her welfare and her happiness, and for the welfare of that other precious soul that was in her keeping. Madame prayed night and morning for the heir of Le Crépuscule. Laure sewed for him, talked of him, dreamed of him, and bitterly envied Lenore. And now there was no whisper in the Castle that was not understood to pertain to "the little lord."

At last there came an April twilight when the glow of the sunset was growing dim beneath the lowering veil of night. Lenore had

passed an unusually quiet day, and was now lying in her bed, quite still and tranquil. That afternoon David had been admitted to her presence, and had amused her with tales from the fairy-lore of Brittany, which she dearly loved. Now he was gone, and Madame Eleanore sat in her room beside the bed. The two had been silent for some time when Lenore's eyes opened, and she said softly, —

“Madame, hast ever thought that there might be a daughter of *Le Crépuscule*? That is what I believe.”

“God forbid!” exclaimed Eleanore, involuntarily. Then, as Lenore turned a white, half-resentful face toward her, madame went on hurriedly: “There must be no more daughters of this house, Lenore. 'Tis what I could scarcely bear, — to see another maiden grow up in this endless twilight—” Her voice trailed off into silence, and then, for a long time, the women were still together, thinking.

A tear or two stole from Lenore's eyes and meandered down her cheek to the folds of her white gown; but her weeping was noiseless. The evening darkened. A sweet, rich breath

of spring blew softly in from off the sea. Finally, one by one, the jewels of night began to gleam out from the sky. Each woman, unknown to the other, was offering up a prayer. And it was in the midst of this quiet scene that Lenore started suddenly up, knowing that her agony had begun.

No one in *Le Crépuscule* slept that night. Laure was called to help her mother ; and the three women were alone in the bedroom of dead Gerault. The demoiselles, all dressed, had assembled in the spinning-room, and clustered there in the torchlight, whispering nervously together, and listening with strained ears for any sounds coming from Madame Lenore's bedchamber. In the hall below were a company of servants, women and men, and a half-dozen henchmen, who quaffed occasional flagons of beer, but spoke not a word through the hours. David and Alixe sat in a corner playing at chess together ; and a wondrous game it was, for neither knew when the other was in check, nor paid attention to a queen in jeopardy. Lastly, Courtoise was there, pacing up and down the hall, his hands clenched behind him, and the beads of sweat rolling off

his face. And how many miles he walked that night, he never knew.

The hours passed solemnly away, and there was no sign from the holy room above. Time dragged by, slowly and yet more slowly, till the hours became as years ; and it seemed that ages had gone when finally the dawn came creeping from beyond the distant hills, and a pale light glimmered across the moving waters. By the time the torches were flaring high in their mingling with the daybreak, there came, from above, the sound of a door softly opening and then closing again. In the hall below, no one breathed. Courtoise paused beside a table, and trembled and shook with cold. Alixe, very pale and white, moved slowly toward the stairs. There was a faint sound of rustling garments across the stones of the upper hall, and then, descending step by step in the wavering light, came Laure, great-eyed and deathly white, after the night's terrible toil. She came alone, carrying nothing in her arms ; and on the fifth step from the floor she stopped still, and looked down upon the motionless company. Once she tried to speak, and her throat failed her.

LENORE

“ Mademoiselle — in the name of God ! ”
pleaded Courtoise, hoarsely.

Laure trembled a little. “ Good friends,” she
said, “ Madame Lenore is safely delivered ; and
there is — a new daughter in *Le Crépuscule*.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ELEANORE



WHEN Laure, her message given, started back upstairs again, Alixe was at her side. At Lenore's door they both stopped, till madame opened it. Laure entered the room at once, but Eleanore shook her head at the maiden, and bade her seek her rest. Then Alixe, disappointed, but too weary for speech, followed the chattering demoiselles down the corridor where were all their rooms, and, saying not a word to one of them, shut herself into her own chamber. Once there, she disrobed with speed, but when she had crept into her bed and pulled the coverings up above her, she found that sleep was an impossibility. There was a dull weight at her heart, which for the moment she could not

analyze. It was as if some great misfortune had befallen her. Yet Lenore lived — was remarkably well. And the child — ah, the child! It was the first, almost, that Alixe had thought of the child. A girl, another girl, in *Le Crépuscule*! a thing of inaction, of resignation, of quiescence; the sport of Fate; the jest of the age! Alas, alas! A girl! To grow up alone, here in this wilderness, companionless, without hope of escape! Thus, dully, inarticulately, every one in *Le Crépuscule* was meditating with Alixe, till at last, one by one, they fell asleep, each in his late bed.

The morning was far spent, and an April sun streamed brightly across her coverlet, when Alixe finally awoke. Her sleep had done her good, and there was no trace of melancholy in her air as she rose and made herself ready for the day. She was healthfully hungry, but there was another interest, greater than hunger, that had caused her so speedily to dress. Hurrying out and down the hall, she stopped at the door to Lenore's room, and tapped there softly.

Laure opened it at once, and smiled a good-

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morning to her. "Come thou in," she whispered. "Lenore would have thee see the child."

Alixé entered softly, and halted near the bed, transfixed by the sight of Lenore. Never, even in the early days of her bridal, had Gerault's lady been so beautiful. The mysterious spell of her holy estate was on her, was clearly visible in her brilliant eyes, in the rosy flush of her cheeks, in the coiling, burning gold of her wondrous hair, in the smiling, gentle languor of her manner. There was something newly born in her, some still ecstasy, that had come to her together with the tiny bundle at her side.

"Come thou, Alixé, and look at her," she said, in a weak voice, smiling happily, and casting tender love-looks at the little thing.

Alixé went over, and, with Laure's aid, unwrapped enough of the small creature for her to see its tiny, red face and feeble, fluttering hands. As she gently touched one of the cheeks, the wide, blue, baby eyes stared up at her, unwinking in their new wonder at the world; while Lenore watched them, eagerly, hungrily. Neither she nor Alixé noticed that

Laure had moved off to a distance, and was staring dully out of a window. When Alixe had stood for some moments over the baby, wondering in her heart what to say to Lenore, the mother looked up at her with those newly unfathomable eyes, and said softly, —

“Put her into my arms, Alixe.”

Alixé did so, laying the infant carefully across the mother's breast. Lenore's arms closed around it, and her eyes fell shut while a smile of unutterable peace lighted up her gentle face.

Alixé knew that it was time for her to go, and, moved as she had never been moved before in her young life, she started toward the door, glancing as she went at Laure, who followed her.

“How beautiful she is!” whispered Alixe, as they stood together on the threshold.

Laure nodded, but there was no sign of joy in her face. “Alas for them both!” she said quietly. “There have been enough daughters in *Le Crépuscule*.”

To this Alixe could find no reply, and so, with a slight nod, she left the room and went down to the morning meal. Madame Eleanore was not there. After the strain of the past

night, she had gone to her room a little after sunrise, leaving Laure to care for the young mother. At breakfast, then, Courtoise and Alixe sat nearest the head of the table, but they did not talk together. In fact, no one said very much during the course of the meal. Instead of the joyful gayety that might have been expected, now that their dead lord's lady was safely through her trial, a dull gloom seemed to overhang everything, to weigh every one down: Courtoise ate in silence, heavy-browed and brooding, his head bent far over; David, in no humor for wit, scarcely spoke; even Alixe, whose heart had been somewhat lightened by the sight of Lenore and her happiness, presently succumbed to the atmosphere, and began to reflect that the last hope of the Castle was gone, that the line of Crépuscule had died forever. And neither she nor any one else paused to think that, if the little Twilight baby asleep upstairs had understood the true nature of her welcome into the world, she might readily have been persuaded to escape again, as rapidly as possible, into her blue ether, where pain and unwelcome were things unknown.

When Alixe had eaten, she returned to the sick-room and, madame being still asleep, insisted upon taking Laure's place till the weary girl had eaten and slept. Lenore had already taken some nourishment, and the baby had been fed ; and, while the noon sunshine poured a flood of gold over the world, the mother and child drowsed happily together in their bed.

Alixé, having set the room as much to rights as was possible, seated herself by one of the open windows, and straightway began to dream. Her thoughts were of her own life, of the new life that she should now soon enter upon, and of what would befall her when she should really reach the vast world that lay behind the barrier of eastern hills, — that world that Laure had found, but could not stay in ; that world from which Lenore had come, and whither Gerault had betaken himself to die. Alixe mused for a long time, and, in her untaught way, philosophized over the sad stories of those in the Castle, and the prospect of a real history that there might be for her when she should leave *Le Crépuscule* ; and it was in the midst of this reverie that the door from Laure's room opened softly, and madame came in.

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Near the threshold she paused, looking intently at the sleeping mother and child, so that she did not at first perceive Alixe, who sat motionless, transfixed by the change which, since yesterday, had come upon madame. If there were gloom throughout the Castle, because of a disappointment in the sex of Lenore's child, that gloom was epitomized in the face of Madame Eleanore. She was paler and older than Alixe had ever seen her before. The white in her hair was more marked than the dark. Every line in her face had deepened. Her eyes, tearless as they were, seemed somehow faded, and her manner bespoke an unutterable weariness. She looked haggard and old and worn. And yet, as she gazed at the unconscious picture of youth and tender love, the joy of the world, and the life of her race asleep there before her, her face softened, and her mouth lost a little of its hardness.

After some moments of this gazing, seeing that still she had not moved, Alixe went to her.

"Laure was weary, madame, and so I took her place while Lenore and the baby slept," she said.

Eleanore nodded, and Alixe wondered uneasily if she should leave the room. After a second or two, however, madame shook away her preoccupation and turned to the girl.

“Alixé,” she said, “none hath as yet been despatched for Monseigneur de St. Nazaire ; and I will not have Anselm baptize the child. Go thou and tell Courtoise to ride and fetch the Bishop as soon as may be, to perform one last ceremony for this house. Give him my good greeting. Tell him Lenore is well — and the babe — a girl. Mon Dieu ! a girl ! — Haste thee, Alixe. And thou needst not return. I will sit here while Lenore sleeps.”

Alixé bowed, but still stood hesitating, near the door, till madame looked up at her impatiently.

“When I have given Courtoise his message, let me bring thee food and wine, madame. Thou ’lt be ill, an thou eat not.”

“Nay. Begone, Alixe ! Bring nothing to me. Why should I eat ? Why should I eat, when after me there will be none of mine to eat in Crépuscule ?” And it was with a kind of groan that madame moved slowly across to the bedside. When Alixe left the

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room she was still standing there, gazing down upon Lenore, who, if awake, could hardly have borne the look with which madame regarded her.

An hour later, Courtoise was on his way to St. Nazaire; but he did not return with Monseigneur till evensong of the next day. Arrived at the Castle, the Bishop was given chance for food and rest after his ride, before he was summoned to Lenore's room, where madame received him. From Courtoise, on their way, St. Nazaire had learned of the disappointment of the Castle; so that he was prepared for what he found. He read Eleonore's mind from her face, and was not surprised at it, but from his own manner no one could have told that he felt anything but the utmost delight with the whole affair. He was full of congratulations and felicitations of every kind; he was witty, he was gay, he was more talkative than any one had ever seen him before; and he took the baby and handled it, cried to it, cooed to it, with the air of an experienced old beldame. Lenore, still radiant with her happiness of motherhood, brightened yet more under the cheer of his presence;

and in her unexpected joy the Bishop found some consolation for the cloud of misery that shrouded madame. Indeed, he watched Lenore with unaffected delight, seeing with amazement the miracle that had been worked in her, and knowing her now for the first time as what she had been before her marriage, when there was, in her nature, none of the melancholy, the morbidness, the pain of loneliness, that had for so long clouded her life.

Lenore was not strong enough to endure even his cheerful presence very long; and when Laure presently stole in, he seized the opportunity that he had been waiting for, and, on some light excuse, drew madame with him out of the room.

The moment that they were alone together, his gay manner dropped from him like a cloak, and he looked upon the woman before him with piercing eyes.

"Eleanore," he said severely, "it were well an thou came with me for a little time before God. There is written on thy face the tale of that oldtime inward rebellion that hath been so long asleep that I had hoped it dead."

Madame looked at him with something of

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defiance, displeasure very plainly to be read in her brilliant eyes. "My lord," she said coldly, "thou'rt wearied with thy ride. It were well an thou soughtest rest."

"I have already rested. Where wouldst thou rather be, — in thine own room, or in the chapel?"

"Charles!" madame spoke with angry impetuosity. "Think you I am to be treated as a child?"

"There are times when all of us are children, Eleanore, — times when we need the Father-hand, the Father-guidance. I would not be harsh with thee were there another way; nevertheless, thou must do my bidding."

She led him in silence to her own room, and they entered it together, St. Nazaire closing the door behind him. Madame seated herself at once in a broad chair near a window, and the Bishop paced up and down before her. The room was warm, for the night air was soft, and a half-dead fire gleamed upon the stone hearth. A torch upon the wall had been lighted, and two candles burned on the table near by. By this light St. Nazaire could watch Eleanore's face as he walked. It was

some moments before he spoke, and when he began, his voice had changed again, and was as gentle as a woman's, —

“ This birth of a girl child hath been a grievous disappointment to thee, dear friend ? ”

Eleanore replied only by a look ; but what words could have expressed half so much ?

“ Art thou angry with me, Eleanore ! Am I to blame for it ? Is there fault in any one for what is come ? Sex is no matter of choice with the world. Were it so, methinks thou hadst not now been grieving.”

“ Thou sayest truly, it is no matter of choice with the world. But hast not ever taught that there is One who may choose always as He will ? There is a fault, and it is the fault of God ! God of God, Charles, have I not had enough to bear ? Could I not, now that the end cannot be far away, have known a little content in mine old age ? What hath there been for me, these thirty years, save sorrow ? With the death of Gerault, I believed that the world held no further woe for me ; but in the following months hope, which I had thought forever gone, came on me again, combat its coming as I would. Yet the thought that an

heir might be born to Crépuscule, the thought that the line might yet be carried on to something better than this eternal sadness, came to be so strong with me that I gave way, fool that I was, to joy. And now, by the merciless wrath of God, Fate makes sport of me again. God alone would have been so pitiless. And am I, a mortal, to forgive the Almighty for all the woes that He recklessly putteth on me?"

In this speech Eleanore's low voice had risen above its usual pitch, and rang out in tones of deep-seated, passionate anger. St. Nazaire paused in his walk to look at her as she spoke; and never had he felt himself in a more difficult position. Sincere as was his belief, there were, indeed, things in the divine order that his creed could not explain away. He dreaded to take the only orthodox stand, — resignation and continued praise of the Lord, for in Eleanore's present state of mind this would be worse than mockery; and yet in this he was obliged at length to take his refuge.

"Eleanore, when Laure, the infant, was first put into thy arms, wast thou grieved that she was not a man child?"

“I had Gerault —”

“Hast thou not loved Laure and cared for her throughout thy life because she was thy child, flesh of thy flesh, blood of thy blood, conceived of great love, and born of suffering?”

“Yea, verily.”

“And, despite her months of grievous wandering from thy sight, still hath she not given thee all the joy that Gerault gave?”

“More, methinks; in that she hath ever been more mine own.”

“Then, Eleanore,” and there was joy in the man’s tone, “take this child of thy son to thy heart and love her. Let her young innocence bring thee peace. Hold her close to thy life, and give and receive comfort through thy love. Seek not woe because she is not what she cannot be. Assume not a knowledge greater than that of God. Trouble not thyself about the future; but, rather, take what is given thee, and know that it is good. Shall not a young voice cause these walls to echo again to the sound of laughter? Will not a child bring light into thy life? Why shouldst thou grieve because, in the years after thy death, Le Crépuscule may fall into other hands than

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those of thy race? Thinkest thou thou wilt be here to see it? For shame, Eleanore! Forget thy bitterness, and find the joy that Gerault's widow already knows!"

Though she would not have acknowledged it, Eleanore was influenced by the Bishop's words; and the change in her was already visible in her face. Judging wisely, then, St. Nazaire let his plea rest where it was, and blessing her, said good-night and left her to sleep or to pray — he could not tell which. And in truth Eleanore slept; but in her sleep, love and pity entered into her heart. She woke in the early dawn, and, hardly thinking what she did, stole into Lenore's room, creeping softly to the bed where the sleeping mother and infant lay. At sight of them a wave of feeling overswept her. She knew again the crowning joy of woman's life: she felt again the glory of youth; and when she returned to her solitude, it was to weep away the greater part of her bitterness, and to take into her inmost heart the helpless baby of Gerault.

On the following morning, in the presence of an imposing company, the Lord Bishop

officiating, the little girl was baptized. Laure and Courtoise were the godparents ; Laure feeling that, in being trusted with this holy office, she stood once more honorably in the eyes of the world. According to her mother's wish, the babe was christened Lenore, and Alixe guessed wrong when she thought the little one called after another of that name. When the ceremony was over, and the baptismal feast lay ready spread, madame took the child into her arms to carry it back to the mother ; and St. Nazaire, seeing the kiss that she pressed upon the tiny cheek, realized that the cause was won.

Madame Eleanore's lead was quickly followed by every one in the Castle ; and the disappointment at the baby's sex wore away so rapidly that in a month probably no one would have admitted that there had ever been any chagrin at all. Perhaps no royal heir had ever known more abject homage than was paid to that wee, bright-eyed, grave-faced, helpless creature, who was perfectly contented only when she lay in her mother's arms.

Lenore regained her strength slowly. Her long winter of idleness and grieving had ill-

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fitted her to bear the strain of what she had endured; and it was many weeks before she tried to leave her room. Thus, bit by bit, the whole life of the Castle came to gravitate around her chamber. It was like a court of which the young mother was queen, and where at certain hours of the day, all the women-folk of Crépuscule were wont to congregate. It was on an afternoon in the middle of May, when summer first hovered over the land, that Lenore was dressed for the first time. She sat in a semi-reclining position by the window, whence she could look off upon the sea, the baby at her side, and Alixe the only other person in the room. For nearly an hour Lenore had been silent, one hand gently caressing the baby's little cheek, her big eyes wandering along the far horizon line. Alixe was bent over a parchment manuscript, which Anselm had taught her how to read, and she scarcely raised her eyes from it to look at anything in the room. Her passage had become complicated, and, at the same time, interesting, when Lenore's voice suddenly broke in upon her, —

“Alixe, 'tis long time now since I saw

Courtoise. Thinkest thou he is near and would come and talk to me?"

Alixé let her poetry go, and jumped hastily up. "I will seek him. An he be about the Castle, he will surely come."

Lenore smiled with pleasure. "Thank thee, maiden. Let him come now, at once."

Alixé, hugging Courtoise's secret to her heart, hurriedly left the room, and ran downstairs, straight upon Courtoise, who stood in the hall below. He was booted and spurred, and his horse waited for him in the doorway. Making a hasty apology to Alixé, he was going on, when she cried to him: "Courtoise, stay! Madame Lenore seeks thy presence. She would have thee go to her and talk with her for an hour this afternoon. Shall I tell her thou'rt ridden hawking?"

"Holy Mary! Say that—say that I come instantly. She hath asked for me? Hurry, Alixé! Say that I come at once!"

Courtoise retreated to his room, trembling like a girl. He had forgotten his horse, which Alixé considerably caused to be taken back to the stable, and while he removed his spurs and fussily rearranged his dress and hair, he tried

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in vain to recover his equanimity. Then, when he could no longer torture himself with delay, he hurried away to the door of her room and there paused again, remembering how many times since her illness he had stood there, both by night and by day, listening, not always vainly, for the sound of her voice, or for the little wailing cry of the hungry babe. And now — now he was to enter that sacred room, holier to him than any consecrated church of God. Now he was to look at her, to touch her hand, to feast his eyes upon her exquisite face. He drew a long breath and was about to tap on the door, when it suddenly opened, and Alixe, finding herself face to face with him, gave a little exclamation, —

“Holy saints! I was just coming to seek thee again. Hadst forgotten that madame waits for thee? There — go in!”

Courtoise never noticed the mischief of Alixe's tone, but went straight into the room, and saw Lenore sitting by the window with the baby on her lap. She turned toward him, smiling, and holding out her hand. He went over, looking at her thirstily, but not so that she could read what was in his heart. Then

he realized vaguely that Alixe had left the room, and that he was alone with Lenore.

"Tis very long, Courtoise, very long, since we have seen each other. Why hast thou not come ere now?"

"Madame! Had I but thought thou'dst have had me! Thrice every day during thy illness came I to thy door to ask after thee and the babe; and since then — often — I have stood and listened, to hear if thou wast speaking here within. But I did not know —"

"Enough, Courtoise! I thank thee. Thou'rt very good. Thou knowest thou'rt all that I have left of Gerault, and I would fain have thee oftener near me. Wilt take the babe? Little one! She feels the strength of a man's arms but seldom. Sit there yonder with her. So!"

She put the tiny bundle into his strong arms, and laughed to see the half-terrified air with which the young fellow bore it over to the settle which she indicated. But when he had sat down, he laid the baby on his knees, and then, retaining careful hold of it, turned his whole look upon Lenore.

She smiled at him, supremely unconscious

of the electric thrills that were making the man's whole body quiver and tremble with emotion. Indeed, it would have been difficult enough to read his feeling in his matter-of-fact manner. For a long time they sat there, talking upon many subjects, but most of all about Gerault, whose name had scarcely crossed Lenore's lips since the time of his death. To Courtoise it was an acute pain to hear her refer to the various incidents of her courtship in Rennes; but back of her words there was no suggestion of either grief or bitterness. She recalled her first acquaintance with Gerault fully, incident by incident, and caused Courtoise to take an unwilling part in the reminiscences. He hoped continually to get her away from the subject, to matters now nearer both of them; but time sped on, and, as the sun began to near the sea, the baby woke from sleep with a little cry that Courtoise recognized with a pang. His hour was over; and he had gained little hope from it. Yet, as he returned the baby to its mother's arms, there was a smile for him in Lenore's calm eyes, and he retreated with a beating heart as Madame Eleanore and Laure came together into the

room, to spend their usual evening hour with the mother and child.

This hour of the day, the twilight time, the time of yearning for things long gone, had of late weeks been drawing these three women of the Twilight Castle very close together. Laure, Lenore, and Eleanore, these three, with Alixe oftentimes a shadow in the background, were accustomed to sit together, watching the sunset die over the great waters, and waiting for the appearance of the evening star upon the fading glow. And in this time of silent companionship each felt within her a new growth, a new, half-sorrowful love for the life in this lonely habitation. The spell of solitude was weaving about them a slow, strong bond, which in after years none of the three felt any wish to break. Many dream-shadows, the ghosts of forgotten lives, rose up for each out of the darkening waste of the sea; and with these spirits of memory or imagination, each one was making a life as real and as strong as the lives of those that dwelt out in the great world, for which, at one time or another, all of them had so deeply yearned. Each felt, in her heart, that her active life was over;

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and, as time passed, and thoughts began adequately to take the place of realities, none of them cared to keep alive the sharp stings of bitterness or of unavailing regret. They knew themselves dead to the great, outer life that each, in her way, had known. Nor did they mourn themselves. What fire of life remained with them had been transformed into secret dreams and ambitions for the future of that little creature swathed so carefully from the world, now lying peacefully asleep upon the mother-breast of Gerault's widow.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE RISING TIDE



UMMER was on the world again, and with its coming, melancholy was banished for a season from *Le Crépuscule*. With the first northward flight of storks, a new air, a breath of hidden life and gayety, crept into the Castle household, and, in the early days of June, broke forth in a riot of pleasures, — caroles, garland-weaving parties, and hunting. As in former times, Laure was now the moving spirit in every sport, and, to the general amazement, madame, who in her younger days had been celebrated at the chase, herself headed one of the rabbit-hunts, — in that day a favorite pastime with women.

The country around *Le Crépuscule* was as beautiful in summer as it was desolate in win-

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ter; for the moorlands were one gay tangle of many-colored wild-flowers. The cultivated land around the peasants' homes was thick with various crops, and the cool, green depths of the forest hid beauties surpassing all those of the open country. The stables of Le Crépuscule were well supplied with horses, for the family, both women and men, had always been persistent riders. In these June days the women-folk, Madame and Laure and the demoiselles, rode early and late, deserting wheel, loom, and tambour-frame to revel in a much-needed rest and change of occupation. Only Lenore refused to take part in the sports, finding pleasure enough at home with the child, who was growing to be a fine lusty infant, with a smile as ready as if she had been born in Rennes. And the mother and child were happy enough to sit all day in the flower-strewn meadow, between the north wall and the dry moat, playing together with bright posies, watching the movements of the birds in the open falconry, and sometimes taking part in quieter revels with the others. Ere June was gone, the demoiselles were scarcely to be recognized for the pale, heavy-eyed, pallid

things that had been wont to assemble in the great hall after supper on winter evenings to listen to the stories told round the fire. Now their laughter was ever ready, their feet light for the dance, their cheeks brown, and their eyes bright with the continual riot in sunlight and sea-winds. Winter lay behind, like the shadow of an ugly dream, and now, of a sudden, God's world, and with it *Le Crépuscule*, became beautiful for man.

In the first week of July, however, the period of gayety was checked by the loss of four members of the household. Two of the demoiselles of noble family, whom madame had taken to train as gentlewomen of rank, Berthe de Montfort and Isabelle de Joinville, had now been in *Le Crépuscule* the customary time for the acquirement of etiquette and the arts of needlework, and escorts arrived from their homes to convoy them away. After their departure, the squires Louis of Florence and Robert Meloc resigned their places and rode out into the world, to seek a life of action.

There were now left in *Le Crépuscule* the demoiselles whom Lenore had brought with

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her from Rennes a year ago, and two others who had come to madame many years ago, and who must perforce stay on, having no other home than this, living as they did upon madame's bounty. And there were also two young squires, who had sworn fealty to madame, but hoped some day to ride to Rennes and win their spurs in the lists of their Lord Duke. For the present they were content to remain out on the lonely coast, where Courtoise taught them the articles of knight-hood, and where twenty stout henchmen could look up to them as superiors. These, with David le petit, Anselm the steward, Alixe, Courtoise, and a young peasant woman, who had come to foster the infant of Madame Lenore, comprised the attendants of the three ladies of Crépuscule. It was a well-knit little company, and one so accustomed to the quiet life, that none of them save only one desired better things.

Of the mood of Alixe during these summer months, much might be said. Throughout the spring she had been in a state of hot desire for what was not in Le Crépuscule. She was filled with unrest; but her plans

were too vague, too indefinite, for immediate action. Strong as was the will that would have carried her through any difficulty that lay not in the condition of her heart, she was still, after nearly six months of dreaming and debating, in *Le Crépuscule*. Still she labored through the long, dull mornings; and still, through the afternoons, she drifted about through moving seas of doubt and yearning. She longed for the world, but she could not give up *Le Crépuscule*, and those whom it held. Here was her problem,—which way to turn. She felt that another such winter as she had just passed would drive her senses from her; but she knew that anywhere outside *Le Crépuscule* the visions of three faces, the fair, sad faces of her ladies, would haunt her by day and by night till she should return to them at last. She carried her struggle always with her, and at length it drove her to seek an oldtime solitude. She began to spend her afternoons in a cave in the great cliff north of that on which the Castle stood. This cave had been formed by the action of the water, and it stretched in cavernous darkness far into the wall of rock,—much farther than Alixe

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had ever dared to go. Near the entrance, four or five feet above the tide-washed floor, was a little ledge where she was accustomed to sit till the rising water drove her to the upper shore. Tides, in Brittany, are proverbially high; and at full tide the top of the cave's opening was scarcely visible above the water; so it behooved Alixe to restrain herself from sleep while she lay therein, meditating on her other life.

On the 19th of July the tide was at low ebb at half-past two in the afternoon; and at three o'clock Alixe entered the cave, and climbed, dry-shod, up to her ledge of rock. Here, as she knew, she was safe for two hours, if she chose to stay so long.

The interior of this cave was by no means an uninteresting place, though Alixe had never yet explored it beyond the space of twenty feet, where it was bright with the daylight that poured in through its jagged entrance. After that it wound a darker way into the cliff, and the far recesses were lost in utter blackness. A spoken word directed toward the inner passage-way would reverberate along that mysterious interior till one could not but

be a little awed at the vast extent of the lost passage. The visible floor of the cavern was a thing of interest and beauty, for at low tide it was like a little park, where pools of clear sea-water alternated with groves of filmy plants, small ridges of pebbles and rocks, and patches of delicately ribbed sand, where every species of shell-fish dwelt. At times Alixe spent hours in studying sea-life in these places; and certainly, on hot summer afternoons, no pleasanter occupation could have been found. Probably others than Alixe would have taken to it, were it not for the fact that the cave was the scene of one of the weirdest legends of the coast, and was held in avoidance as much by Castle folk as by the peasantry. Alixe, however, had long been held to possess some uncanny power over the people of the supernatural world, for she would venture fearlessly into the most unholy spots, emerging unharmed and undisturbed; nor could any one ever learn from her whether or not she had actually held intercourse with the creatures whom they devoutly believed in, and so devoutly dreaded.

To-day, certainly, there was no suggestion of the uncanny about her as she lay upon her

ledge of rock, looking off upon the sparkling waters that danced up to the very edge of her retreat. With one hand she shaded her eyes from the golden glare, and her head was pillowed on her other arm. Her usually smooth brow was puckered into a frown for which the sun was not responsible; nor yet was Alixe's mind upon any subject that might be supposed to anger or distress her. For the moment she had dropped her inward debate, and was lazily watching the sea. The warmth of the afternoon had made her drowsy, and now the shadowy coolness of the cave soothed her till her vivid mental images had become a little blurred, and the sparkle of the water and its crispy rustle, as it advanced and retreated over the sand outside, was luring her mind into the faery wastes of dreamland. She wondered a little whether she were awake or asleep; but, in point of fact, her eyes were not actually shut, when a slender figure came round a corner of the entrance, and slipped lightly into the cave.

Alixé started, and sat up straight, while a high tenor voice cried out: "Ho, Mistress Alixe, 'tis thou, then? Is't I that discover

thee in thy retreat, or thou that hast invaded mine? ”

“ Ohé, David, thou’st startled me! Me-seemeth I all but slept.”

“ ’Tis a day for sleep, but this is not the place. Is there room there on the ledge? Wilt let me up? ’Tis wet enough, below here.”

“ Yea; thy feet slop i’ the sand, and thou’st frightened two crabs. Canst climb hither? ”

He laughed merrily, and scrambled up beside her, his light body seeming but a feather in weight. She made room beside her, and he sat down there, cocking one particolored knee upon the other, and beginning lightly : “ Thus bravely, then, thou comest into the cave of the water goblin. Art thou, perchance, courted here by some sly water sprite? ”

The maiden, responding to his mood, laughed also. “ Not unless thou’lt play the sprite, Master David. Say — wilt court me? ”

“ Nay, sister. Thou and I, and all i’ the Castle up above, know each other in a way that admits no love-foolery. Heigho! ” The little man’s tone had changed to one of whimsical earnestness. Alixe made no immediate reply to his speech, and so, to entertain him-

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self, he took from his open bag two pebbles, and began to toss them lightly into the air, one after the other.

For a few seconds Alixe watched him absently. Then she said: "Those pebbles, David, are like thee and me. Watch now which will be the first to fall from thy hand. Thou'rt the mottled; I the gray."

"And I, damsel," said he, as he began to handle them a little less carelessly, "I, who sit here forever, for my amusement tossing into the air two light souls, catching them when they come back to me, and flinging them again away — who am I, I ask?"

"Thou, David?" Alixe's face took on a little, bitter smile. "Why, thou art that inexorable thing that men call God. Wilt never drop thy stones from their wearisome sphere, Almighty One?"

"They will not fall. They return to me evermore," he answered; and, after another toss or two, he let them both remain in his hand while he looked at them for a moment. After that he put them back into his bag again, with a curious smile. "That, then, is our end," he remarked, at last.

"*Is* it our end? David, David! Shall I not leave Le Crépuscule, to fare forth into the world? I dream, and dream, and vow unto myself that I shall surely go; and then — I still remain."

"Ay. There are things that keep thee here — and me too. There is the baby, now, and its angel-faced mother. And then madame — how is one to leave her, when she is a little more alive than formerly? I, too, Alixe, have dreamed dreams. The fever of my boyhood, with its wanderings, its life, its continual change, comes upon me strong sometimes. Here, in this place, my wit lies buried, my soul grows gray within me, my eyes have forgot the look of the world's bright colors. And yet I stay on — I stay on forever."

"How if we two went out together, David, thou and I? Think you the world might hold a place for us? I would be a good comrade, I promise thee. I would march stoutly at thy side, nor complain when weariness overcame me. We should not have always to beg for food, for I have a little bag —"

"See, Alixe, look! There below, on the sand, by that sharp-pointed stone, — there is

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a gray-white crab. He must be hurt. See how he fumbles and struggles, without avail, to reach the little pool ten inches from him. Watch him ; he makes no progress. Now that were thou and I, thrown upon the world. Oh, this place is full of omens ! I have found them here before. 'Tis the witchery of the cave."

Alixé failed to smile. This last augury, though it confirmed the one that she herself had made, did not please her. She sat silent on the ledge, her feet hanging, her elbows on her knees, her head on her hand, watching intently all the little dramas taking place below her among the sea-creatures. Nor was David in a mood to make conversation. So the two of them sat silent for a long time — how long a time neither of them knew. The water was growing more brightly golden under the beams of the fast-descending sun, and Alixé noted the fact, but held her peace. It was David who, after a little while, suddenly exclaimed, —

"Diable, Alixé ! See how the tide hath risen ! We shall be wet enough getting out and back to the upper cliff. Come quickly !" As he spoke, he slid from the ledge, landing in water that was up to his ankles. "Quickly, Alixé !

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I will steady thee. Come, thou'lt but be the wetter if thou stayest."

Alixé sat motionless upon the ledge above, and looked calmly down upon the dwarf.

"Reflect, David, how easy it were not to wet my ankles thus. How easy 't would be just to sit here — until the stone should drop for the last time into the hand of God."

David stood looking up at her, wide-eyed. The idea was slow to pierce his brain. "Why, yes," said he, "'t were easy enow, easy enow. Yet when I go, 't must be from mine own room, and by a clean dagger-stroke. I care not to choke myself to death in a goblin's cave. Come, Alixé, the water riseth."

"Go thou on, David. I can come down when I will; for I have traversed the way often."

"Come down!"

"Nay, David."

"Come down."

"Nay."

The water was deeper by four inches than it had been when he first reached the bottom of the cave. The dwarf looked up at the girl, who sat smiling at him, and his face reddened

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slightly. Then, without more ado, he climbed back upon the ledge, and sat down beside Alixe, hanging his dripping feet toward the water, which now covered the tallest of the stones on the floor of the cave.

“David, thou must go. Climb down, and save thyself quickly. Thy slender body cannot much longer breast the tide.”

David crossed his knees and clasped his hands around them. “If thou stayest, I also will remain.”

“I beg of thee, go, ere it is too late!”

“Not without thee.”

“In the name of God I ask it.”

“We two were together in God’s hand.”

“Then so be it, David. Sit thou here beside me. We will wait together.”

The little man did not reply to her this time, and Alixe felt no more need for speech. They sat there, occupied with their own thoughts, both watching, under the spell of a peculiar fascination, how the green water was mounting, mounting toward them. The cave was filled with blinding light from the setting sun. The roar of the ocean, a voice mighty and ineffable, filled all their consciousness.

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White-crested breakers rolled in and broke below them, and their faces were wet with chill salt spray. The water in the cave was waist-deep.

Alixé was growing cold. A deadly intoxication stole upon her senses, and she bent far over the ledge to look into the swirling, foamy green below her.

"By the Almighty God, His creation is wondrous! This is a scene worthy of the end!" cried David, suddenly, in a hoarse, emotional tone.

Alixé started violently. The sound of a human voice, breaking in upon the universal murmur of the infinite waters, sent a sudden stab to her heart. In a quick flash, she beheld Lenore's baby holding out its feeble hands to her. Near it stood Laure, the penitent; and, on the other hand, madame, with her great, grave, sorrowful eyes fixed full upon herself, Alixé.

"David!" cried the girl, suddenly, wildly, above the roar of the tide: "David! We must escape!—Quickly! Quickly! Quickly!"

As she spoke, she left the ledge, to find herself swaying almost shoulder deep in the

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fierce, swelling water. "Come!" she cried, her face livid with her new-born terror.

For an instant, David looked down upon her with something resembling a smile. Then he followed her, and would have been carried off his feet in the water, had not Alixe steadied him with one hand, while, with the other, she clung to the rock above her head. The sudden chill woke David's senses, and he said sharply: "We must hurry, Alixe! There is no time to lose."

Then the two of them began their work of getting out of the cave. David, with his small, lithe body clad in tight-fitting hosen and jerkin, started to swim lightly through the water, diving headforemost into the beating breakers, and rounding toward the shore with rather a sense of pleasurable skill than anything else. But with Alixe, the case was different. Her long skirts were soaked with water, and clung disastrously about her feet. The idea of her swimming was vain; and she grimly gave thanks for her height. But she found that the matter of walking had its dangers too. The bottom of the cave and the outer stretch that lay between her and safety



*H*AND in hand, by the murmurous sea, they walked.—Page 427

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was very uneven. She stumbled over rocks and sank into sudden hollows, continually hampered by her clinging skirts. Presently she fell, and a great breaker came tumbling over her. In it she lost her self-control, and was presently rolling helpless in the tide, gasping in sea-water with every terrified breath, and unable to get her limbs free from their binding, clinging robe. Alixe was very near death in earnest, now, and she knew it. Presently, where a sweeping wave left her head for a moment above water, she sent one hoarse, guttural shriek toward David, who had regained the land; and he turned, horrified, to look at her. She heard his cry of amazement and distress, and then she was rolled upon her face, and knew nothing more till she found herself lying on the sand, with David bending over her, whiter than death, and trembling like a woman.

She was dizzy and weak and sick, and her lungs ached furiously; yet with it all, she saw David's distress, and managed to keep herself conscious by staring at him fixedly.

"Up, Alixe! Up!" he muttered. "*Thou must* get up to the Castle. I cannot carry thee

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there, and here thou 'lt perish. Up, I say ! Here, hold to my belt. See, the water is upon us again."

With an effort that seemed to her to be superhuman, Alixe struggled to her feet. He held her dripping skirts away from her, so that she could walk as little hampered as possible ; and though she staggered and reeled at every step, they still made progress, and were halfway up the cliff before she collapsed again, utterly exhausted. Happily, at that moment, David spied the figure of Laure at the top of the cliff, and he cried to her with all the strength that was left him to come down. In a moment she was beside them, staring in silent astonishment at their plight.

"The demoiselle Alixe had a fancy for bathing. She hath bathed," observed David.

Alixé did not speak. But suddenly her eyes met Laure's, and she burst into hysterical laughter. Laure, being a woman, realized that she was strained to the point of collapse. So she bade David go on before them and take all precautions to recover from his bath ; and then, as soon as Alixe signified her ability to go on again, Laure put one of her strong, young arms

about the dripping body, and, sustaining more than half her weight, succeeded in getting her to the Castle. Alixe demurred faintly about going in, for she dreaded questions. But it was that hour of the day when the open rooms of the Castle were deserted, when all the world was asleep or at play, and, as the two crossed the courtyard and went through the lower hall, they met no one but a pair of henchmen who were too respectful of Laure to voice their curiosity. As the young women went through the upper hall, on their way to Alixe's room, there came, from behind Lenore's closed door, the gurgling crow of the baby. At this sound Alixe shuddered, and through her heart shot a pang of horrified remorse at the crime she had so nearly committed.

A few moments later the exhausted girl lay in her bed, wrapped round with blankets, her dripping garments stripped away, and her body glowing again with the warmth of vigorous friction, while her wet hair was fastened high on her head, away from her face. When Laure had removed, as far as possible, every evidence of the escapade, she bent for a moment over the pillow of her foster-sister, and then

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stole quietly away. Alixe made no sign at her departure. She lay back in the bed, her eyes closed, her face set like marble, her mind wandering vaguely over the events of the afternoon. Gradually her world grew full of misty, creeping shadows, and she was on the borderland of sleep, when some one again bent over her, and the fragrant breath of hot wine came to her nostrils. With an effort she shook her eyes open, to find Laure's kindly face above her, and Laure's hand holding out to her a silver cup.

"Drink, Alixe. 'T will give thee strength."

Obediently, Alixe drank; and the posset sent a new glow of warmth through her body.

"Now, if thou canst, thou must sleep."

Alixé sent a thoughtful glance into her companion's eyes, and there was something in her look that caused Laure to take both of the trembling hands in her own, and to wait for Alixe to speak.

"Nay, Laure, nay; I cannot sleep till I have told thee. Some one I must tell, — some one that will understand. Let me confess to thee."

Laure seated herself on the edge of the bed, Alixe still retaining her hands. And Laure's

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sad eyes looked down upon the drawn face of her foster-sister, while she spoke. "Alixé," she said softly, "methinks I know thy confession. Thou hast tried to leave Le Crépuscule. Is it not so?"

Alixé's eyes suddenly filled with tears. "It is so. I tried — to leave Le Crépuscule." The last she only whispered, faintly.

"But it drew thee back again? The Castle would not loose its hold on thee? Even so was it with me. Methought I hated it, Alixé, with its loneliness and its shadows and its vast silences. Yet however far away I was, I found it always before my eyes, or hidden in my thoughts. Through my hours of highest happiness I yearned for it; and it drew me back to it at last."

"It is true! It is true! I know thou speakest truth."

"And thou wilt not try again to go away, my sister?"

"Not again; oh, not again! I could see you all, you and madame and Madame Lenore, and your eyes called me back. It is my home, is't not? I have a place here, have I not? Ah, Laure, thou'st been so good to

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me ! Shall we not, thou and I, go back again into our childhood, and dream of naught better than dwelling here forever in this place ? Both of us have sinned. And now we are come home into the shadow of the Castle of Twilight, for forgiveness' sake."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE MIDDLE OF THE VALLEY



LIXE had faith enough in David to believe that he would keep silent about the affair of that afternoon, and her confidence was not misplaced. No one save Laure knew of the caprice and the projected sin that had led them into their dangerous plight. And to the dwarf's credit be it said that he never attached any blame to Alixe for their adventure. Indeed, thereafter, his manner toward her was marked by unusual consideration, a little veiled interest and sympathy, sprung from a knowledge that their habits of mind had led them both in the same ways of thought and desire. During the remainder of the summer, however, neither of them ventured again into the Goblin's Cave; and, from Alixe's

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mind at least, every thought, every desire, to leave the Castle, had been washed away. Her dreams of another life were dead. And, as the golden days slipped by, the thought that *Le Crépuscule* must be her home forever, came to have no bitterness in it; for she had learned in a strange way how *Le Crépuscule* was rooted into her heart, and how impossible it would be that she should leave it till the great Inevitable should bid her say farewell.

Indeed, the Castle had set its seal upon every one of its inmates. The little household had acquired the peculiar characteristics that generally grow up in a secluded community. Every dweller in the Twilight Land was unconsciously possessed of the same quiet manner, the same air of tranquil repose, the same habit of abstracted thought. And these things had stolen upon them so unawares that none was conscious of it in any other, and least of all in herself. It was a singularly beautiful atmosphere in which to bring up a little being fresh to the world. In this place a new soul might have dwelt forever untainted by any mark of worldliness, of passion, or of sin; for these things were foreign to the whole place. No

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one in the Castle but had, at some time, been through the depths of human experience, been swayed by the most powerful emotions, and known the passion that is inherent in every mortal. But from these things the Twilight folk had been purified by long stretches of vain longing, vain struggles in the midst of solitude, and that continued repression that alone can eradicate mortal tendencies toward sin. And now the women of this Castle had reached, in their progress, the neutral vale of tranquillity that lies between the gorgeous meadows of delight and the grim crags of grief and disappointment.

There was no one in the Castle that did not at times reflect upon these things ; but of them all, Eleanore saw most clearly whence they had all come, and where they now were. Whither they might be going — ah, that ! that, who should say ? But she could see and understand the quiet happiness that Lenore had reached through her child ; and the increasing contentment, that was more than resignation, in Laure. And if she was ignorant of the route by which Courtoise, Alixe, and David had come into the kingdom of tranquillity, at least she knew that

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all had reached it, and was glad that it was so. To St. Nazaire, who was now her only connection with the outer world, she talked of all these things, and found in him not quite the spirit of her Castle, but yet a great understanding of human and spiritual matters.

Summer wove out its web over the Castle by the sea, and at length its golden heat began to give way before the attacks of chilly nights and shortening days. The earth grew rich and red with autumn. Chestnut fires began to blaze upon peasants' hearths, and the early morning air had in it that little sting that brings the blood to the cheek and fire to the eye. It was still too early for flights of storks toward the Nile, and the year, hovering on the edge of dissolution, was at the zenith of its glory. It was the time when the smoke from the forest fires lingers pungently over the land for days on end, like incense proffered to the beauty of Mother Earth. It was the time when the sun rises and sets in a veil of mist that transcends the splendor of its golden gleams, till, before the incomparable richness and purity of its glory, the human spectator can only stand back, aghast and trembling with awe. In fine,

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it was that time when, Nature having reached the full measure of her maturity, she was turning to look back upon her youth, in retrospect of all the loveliness that had been hers, before she should start toward the darker, colder, grayer regions that lay about her coming grave.

It was late in the afternoon of such an autumn day that the three women of *Le Crépuscule*, Laure, Lenore, and Eleanore, each lightly wrapped about to protect her from the slight chill in the air, went out of the Castle to the terrace bordering the cliff, for their evening walk. In the hearts of all three lay that little wistful sadness that was part of the time of year, and in their surrounding solitude they involuntarily drew close each to the other. Yet their faces were not wholly sad. None of them wept at the thought of the long winter that was again upon them. Hand in hand, by the murmurous sea, they walked, looking off upon the broad plain of moving waters, each unconsciously seeking to read there the destiny of her remaining years.

The hour was a holy one, and there came no sound from the living world to pierce its

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stillness. Nature knelt before the great marriage of the sun and sea. The altar of the west was hung with golden and purple tapestries; and the ministers of the sky poured out a libation of crimson-flowing wine before the Lord of Heaven. And when the sacrifice was made, all could behold how the great sun slipped gently from his car into the embrace of the sea, and the two of them were presently hidden underneath the golden locks and shimmering veil of the beautiful bride; and thereafter Twilight, the swift-footed handmaid, aided by all the ocean nymphs, quickly pulled the broad curtains of gray and crimson across the portals of the bridal room.

The sweet dusk deepened, but it was not yet time for the rising of the moon. There was still a flush of red in the west, and still the breasts of the gulls that veered over the waters flashed white and luminous in the gathering gray. The silence was absolute, save for the silken swish of the tide rising gently along the shore. The spell of twilight, the great soul-twilight of the middle ages, hung heavy on the battlements of the Castle on the cliff. On the terrace the three women paused in their

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slow walk. Lenore, her white face uplifted, and a look in her face as if the gates of Heaven had opened a little before her eyes, said dreamily, —

“How sweet it is, — and how beautiful, — our home !”

The silence of the others throbbed assent to her whispered words.

The gulls were sinking slowly toward their nests. The drawbridge over the moat was just lifting for the night. A lapwing or two floated round the high turrets of the Castle ; and from the doorway there, Alixe was coming forth, bearing Lenore's baby in her arms. The stillness grew more intense, and over the edge of the eastern trees slipped the round, pink harvest moon. Then, one by one, a few great stars came sparkling out into the sky.

“See,” murmured Eleanore, very softly, “the east is clear around the rising moon.”

And Laure replied to her : “Yes, very clear. How beautiful will be the morrow's dawn !”

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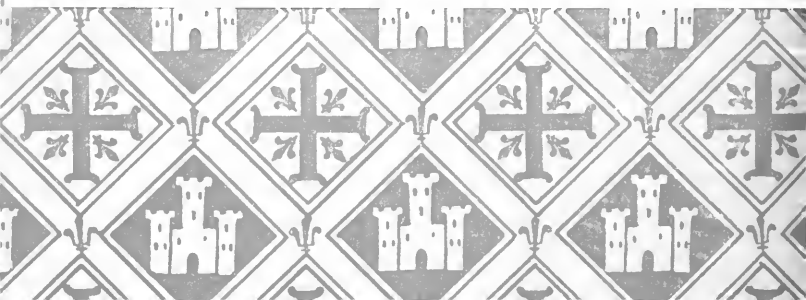
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